

“Some appointed work to do”:

Gender and Agency in the works of Elizabeth Gaskell

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine relationships between gender and agency in the works of Victorian author Elizabeth Gaskell. Gaskell's position within discussions of nineteenth-century feminisms has long been a subject of debate, and her celebration of and focus on femininity, women's lives, and the domestic sphere of nineteenth-century womanhood is inevitably crucial in critical analyses of her work. I argue that Gaskell's take on gender is a more sophisticated one than has been recognised. In her fictional depictions of the agency and power of women and men, as well as in commentary from her correspondence and her biography of her friend and contemporary woman author Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell conceives of the traditionally feminine sphere of influence as more conducive to action than the masculine realm, where notions of authority and responsibility paradoxically place limits on individual ability and agency. These ideas are further complicated in Gaskell's work by an awareness of the constructed or unfixed nature of gender, a conscious recognition of gender roles as not essentially tied to sex difference but rather as fluid, mutable, and primarily utilitarian.

My argument situates Gaskell's position contextually, with reference to contemporary nineteenth-century discussions of the roles and expectations of men and women. It is organised in terms of the thematic focus of her novels, with chapters on industry and class relations, fallen women, religion and marriage, and home and family. Within this framework I suggest a progression in the complexity of Gaskell's thinking both chronologically and in the shift of focus from topics that are centered in masculine spheres of power, such as the economic, political, and religious, to those that are firmly ensconced in the feminine domestic realm of the personal home and local community. I end with a discussion of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and Gaskell's thoughts on female authorship, concluding that Gaskell's locating of agency in the feminine is a means by which she can promote alternative ways of being and recognize that diverse ways of seeing the world and one's own identity or position within it are essential in order to create and maintain effective societies.

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Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) has been labeled as a proto-feminist and, conversely, a traditionalist and even apologist for patriarchal ideologies. This dissertation argues for the complexities of Gaskell's thinking about gender and demonstrates how she both participates in and moves beyond the discussions of her time, ultimately conceiving of relationships between individual women and men and gender ideals in a challenging and illuminating way. As this dissertation will suggest, this is revealed most significantly in her discussions and fictional depictions of agency as inversely related to official ideas of power. The ideas are encapsulated in a letter Gaskell wrote to her friend Eliza Fox in 1856, at the mid-point of her authorial career, expressing the particular conflict she felt over women's issues and gender roles. The letter accompanied a petition addressed to Parliament supporting a Married Women's Property Bill, which Gaskell signed and was returning to Fox. Gaskell comments about the petition, "I don't think it is very definite, and *pointed*; or that it will do much good" (*Letters* 379). She goes on:

a husband can coax, wheedle, beat, or tyrannize his wife out of something and no law whatever will help this that I see. (Mr Gaskell begs Mr Fox to draw up a bill for the protection of *husbands* against wives who will spend all their earnings) However our sex is badly enough used and legislated *against*, there's no doubt of *that* – so though I don't see the definite end proposed by these petitions I'll sign.
(379)

Gaskell recognizes that there is a need for improvement in the individual lives of women, but does not accept changes in the legal system as most effective means to obtain it. Officially sanctioned power, in this case the law, is trumped by other ways of achieving a desire. From physical beating to emotional coaxing and wheedling, to financial earning and spending, Gaskell acknowledges there are alternate ways of controlling people and getting what one wants. The law is a means to official kinds of power, but Gaskell sees unofficial or subversive power as just as potent and outside of the control of legislation. She both applies and explodes gender stereotypes, suggesting husbands can embody typical masculine physical power but also utilize the feminine tools of influence, wheedling and coaxing. Wives are given the traditional women's foible of extravagant spending but presented as a weapon, a means of control. In this short

extract, Gaskell suggests that men and women are confined by gender stereotypes but also able to transcend them, that official power does not equal or cancel out other means of personal agency, and that there are balances and alternatives that exist in relationships between power and gender, so the only good that legislation can do is to combat or counteract itself.

Gaskell's fiction presents a similarly complex portrait of women and men and the relationships between them. Recognizing that men are in a position of much more official authority and power than women could claim, Gaskell does not accept it as given that women are thus less fulfilled, valuable, or useful. In fact, consistently within Gaskell's writing, the power that men are supposed to have actually creates limits to the good that they can do, while women are able to act both within the traditionally feminine domestic sphere and, when necessary, in traditionally masculine public realms. Her fiction is concerned with how individual men and women can act and accomplish their goals and desires, sometimes because of and sometimes in spite of, ideologies, authorities and institutions that lay claims to power. Through examining the depictions of gender, power, and agency in Gaskell's fiction, I will suggest that her interest lay in the differences in the kinds of socially defined power that men and women possessed, and that for her answers come from recognizing the importance of that diversity of perspective and the opportunity for effective action and good work thus created. My approach is contextual, locating Gaskell's ideas about masculinity and femininity within contemporary debates and anxieties and suggesting that her particular take on the matter complicates accepted notions of Victorian feminist thinking. Thus, it tracks Gaskell's conceptions of gender through her depictions and negotiations of femininity specifically. However, since for Gaskell the feminine is defined by its contrasting and symbiotic relationship to the masculine, explorations of the roles and expectations of men are also an integral part of the discussion. Gaskell's own lack of differentiation in terms of limits – men and women both face trials and oppressions of equal but different kinds – make this more broadly a gender analysis involving a balance between the differences accorded by gender.

Gaskell's femininity and her position as a female author have long been a consideration for critics. In a recent (2007) overview of Gaskell criticism, Susan Hamilton notes that Gaskell's contemporaries were keen to label her novels as women's reading and thus to "put her back in her womanly place" (182) while Terence Wright, in his 1995 book on Gaskell, still insists on identifying her as "Mrs. Gaskell," thus keeping her wifely persona at the forefront of his analysis

of her work. As many critics have pointed out, the tradition which insists on a kind of innate femininity in Gaskell's writing dates back to Virginia Woolf, who in 1910 identifies Gaskell's "instinct in writing" which "was to sympathise with others" with her motherhood and her desire to act "like a wise parent" (147). For Woolf, though Gaskell's feminine sympathy is admirable, she "seems a sympathetic amateur beside a professional in earnest" (146)¹ and it is "why, when one begins to read her, one is dismayed by the lack of cleverness" (147).² Lord David Cecil's commonly cited 1934 appraisal, in which he finds Gaskell's femininity both charming and a basis upon which to dismiss her writing, suggests that in *Cranford* Gaskell "has found for once a form proper to her inspiration, short, episodic, exclusively concerned with women" (241) but condemns her male characters as "disastrous" (233). He finds Gaskell's men to be "imperfectly disguised Victorian women, prudish, timid, and demure, incapable of regarding any question except in its personal aspect" (234). This assessment, which appears to be a reflection of Cecil's view of women in general as much as of Gaskell's particular talents, firmly ensconces Gaskell in the realm of the personal and exclusively feminine. Challenges to this perspective eventually arose in the 1950s and 1960s from critics who recognized the political importance and value of Gaskell's industrial or social problem novels. Kathleen Tillotson, for example, in 1954 declares *Mary Barton* "the outstanding example – outstanding in merit as in contemporary fame" (202) because it was "more perhaps than any other novel of its time, a novel with a social *effect*" (222). Following suit are critics Raymond Williams (1958) and John Lucas (1967), who also argue for the value of Gaskell's political novels, though they find her taking refuge from the political ramifications of her own arguments in her tendency to present personal resolutions to political problems, a tactic that has been perceived to be a feminine backing away from a significant challenge. Even in the industrial novels the focus ends up on personal romance. Still, and my own study is no exception, Gaskell's own gender is a factor in practically every analysis of her work. This is perhaps partially due to the precedent set by early criticism, partially due to the fact that women's writing in general tends to be subject to gender-based analysis, but mainly, I think,

¹ Woolf's comparison here is with her own contemporary John Galsworthy. She claims that the "novels of today are so much terser, intenser, and more scientific. Compare the strike in *North and South* with the *Strife* of Mr. Galsworthy" (146). *Strife* was published in 1909.

² Though she does not make the equation specifically in her evaluation of Gaskell, Woolf appears to read her as an "Angel in the House" figure like those she discusses in her essay "Professions for Women." Woolf imagines this figure cajoling her to write from a feminine, sympathetic, and flattering standpoint, and she finds these strictures to be artistic anathema, imposing impossible limits on women's writing. For Gaskell, as I will argue, they are the means to escape limits.

due to the fact that gender is a significant subject of her work, so that whether a story is about industry and class inequity or about witchcraft in Salem, it is also always about what it means to be a man or woman. Because of her own role as a woman attempting to negotiate in realms of masculine authority, Gaskell's awareness of the advantages and frustrations of gender expectations is heightened, and the ways in which gender and power are interdependent becomes a major focus of her work.

Whether or not Gaskell's apparent allegiance to the traditionally feminine, domestic, and personal world of the home is reason to qualify or disqualify her as a proto-feminist writer has been the subject of plenty of debate among critics in the area. One of the earliest and strangest, but among the most important responses to a perceived feminist point of view in *Cranford* comes from Martin Dodsworth in 1963. He sees the book as an outpouring of Gaskell's "unconscious hostility to the male [which] struggles with her awareness of the pointlessness of such hostility in the predominantly masculine society of her day" (138). Dodsworth's representation of the "horror of the Cranford situation," (139) brought about by the idea that its women "pretend to be as good as, or even better than, men," (133) while as clearly biased along gendered lines as Cecil's argument three decades earlier,³ begins to recognize that the gender roles that people are expected to play is a theme in Gaskell's work, and a conflicted theme at that. The real problem that Dodsworth identifies here is one that continues to worry readers concerned with women in Gaskell – whether she espouses radical proto-feminist doctrine or accepts and condones the patriarchal status-quo, or does one thing consciously or overtly, and the other sub-consciously or subversively.⁴ As feminist thought moved from the first-wave interest in securing legal, economic, and political equality for women to second-wave considerations of the importance of recognizing the value of femininity as an alternative to masculinity, feminist criticism began to notice this kind of validation of women's values in Gaskell's work. Nina Auerbach's influential *Communities of Women* (1978) includes a chapter on *Cranford* that suggests that in excluding "both patriarchal marriage and the industrial rogueries" (88) of the outside world, it is a progressive and subversive re-conception of women's lives and roles. In 1984 Coral Lansbury

³ For Cecil and Dodsworth, that Victorian femininity is conceived of as lesser than masculinity is a given.

⁴ One of the most important achievements of Dodsworth's article is the critical response that it elicited. Patricia Wolfe's "Structure and Movement in *Cranford*" (1968) and Rowena Fowler's "Cranford: Cow in Grey Flannel or Lion *Couchant*?" (1984) are two particularly perceptive article-length reactions to Dodsworth which argue for its feminist message.

draws on Edgar Wright's earlier work (1965) to revive interest in Gaskell as a skilled writer with an "innovative approach to narration" (Lansbury 117) and argues that Gaskell's focus on the family is the theme that unites her work, suggesting coherence as well as placing value on the traditionally feminine sphere. In her 1987 self-declared "feminist revision" (2) of perceptions of Gaskell, Patsy Stoneman takes the acknowledged fact that Gaskell's work is mainly about women further and claims that the focus, specifically on the maternal and on mothering, is in fact an "effort at social reconstruction" (13) that challenges traditional patriarchal structures by valuing the maternal instead. Deanna L. Davis, in her 1992 analysis of both Gaskell's work and the motives behind critical responses to it, backs away from these claims for Gaskell's strong feminist stance. She strikes a compromise between Gaskell as a covert proto-feminist subverting patriarchal tradition by implementing a matriarchal worldview and as a staunch conventionalist upholding the *status quo*. Davis recognises that "the feminine nurturance on which [Gaskell] grounded her life and work has appeared to many feminist critics as unappealing at best and traitorous at worst" (507), but also that the other side of the critical question can be "skewed by the pressure to rescue Gaskell's work from feminist oblivion, which they assume can only be done by demonstrating that Gaskell is indeed a feminist prototype" (518). Davis instead argues that Gaskell's focus on the maternal is not the outright resistance that some feminist critics desire, but rather a balance between the idealization of maternal nurturance and the recognition of mothers as fallible, human figures as well, which she suggests is in itself a feminist viewpoint. Davis's reading of Gaskell's feminism as something of a compromise marks another new direction in Gaskell criticism that suggests the nuance of her thinking on issues of gender. For the most part these analyses of feminism in Gaskell have focused on the maternal aspects of her work. Mine departs from these to suggest that it is not only how women care, nurture, and sympathise that is given value in Gaskell's fiction, but also how they consistently and persistently spring into action in order to achieve important goals for themselves and for others. In Gaskell, the theme of women's agency, inside and outside of the domestic sphere, is also an essential aspect of the discussion of feminism and gender.

The critical understanding of Gaskell's position within feminism is, as Davis's work suggests, defined in part by the particular perspectives that each critic brings to Gaskell, and their differing feminist allegiances. My own perspective has the benefit of the influence of all of these varied readings, which allows me to argue that in certain ways Gaskell fits in with each of them.

Gaskell's historical era and her experiences with petitions and struggles for the legal rights of women, her support of ventures such as Florence Nightingale's nursing campaign during the Crimean war, and her management of her own career as a writer in dealing with her editors and publishers, would suggest that her feminism, if it can be called such, fits most appropriately with what we now call the first wave.⁵ However, Gaskell's support for the legal battles for women's rights, as exemplified in the letter quoted at the beginning of this introduction, was conditional at best. Though she was situated in and sometimes a participant in aspects of first-wave feminist thought, Gaskell's valorization of the feminine world and the ways of thinking and being that arise from it, alongside of her view of gender roles as slippery and fluid, suggest an alignment with later phases of feminist theory. The sense that women must remain different from men and that female or womanly ways of thinking are valuable and need to be retained is that of second-wave feminism, which insists that women's accomplishments, perspectives, and values are an important alternative to men's. Gaskell's moving beyond gender stereotypes, her creation and validation of masculine women and feminine men – the Benson siblings in *Ruth*, for example – and her explorations of both the constructed nature of gender roles and the fluidity or negotiability of those roles anticipate to an extent third-wave feminist positions as articulated by Judith Butler and others, wherein the categories of masculine and feminine as means of identity are oppressive, and the goal of feminism is to recognize gender as no more than performance.⁶ In this way, the feminist aspects of Gaskell's fiction, as well as her life, can be identified with each of these three different phases of feminist thought. Arguing that Gaskell's thinking spans all three waves, however, is somewhat problematic. First, there are apparent contradictions between the theories that the different perspectives promote, especially the second-wave identification and celebration of womanhood versus the third-wave arguments against femininity as anything other than performance. Second, it may seem overly ambitious or complimentary to claim

⁵ Though the concept of feminist thought as falling into three distinct waves is one that does not appear until long after the first of these waves was over, it is a useful way of simplifying the vastly complicated and diverse sets of ideas covered by the term "feminism." The waves must be understood as loose categories however, and my argument in this dissertation will suggest the theories and interests espoused by each wave are not entirely distinct or mutually exclusive, even when they may seem to be.

⁶ In her influential book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler declares that there "is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constructed by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result" (25). Butler imagines a new kind of feminism resulting from this understanding: "if a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal" (5).

Gaskell's affiliation with the sophisticated claims of more recent feminism which has had the benefit of decades of thought, argument, and evolution from the conceptions of gender and the roles of men and women current in Victorian ideas. While the terminology of later versions of feminism was not available to Gaskell and her contemporaries, an understanding of the ways in which expectations of gender worked and how they were instilled into boys and girls existed and was very much a part of Victorian thought. One need only to look to the plethora of literature on how to raise a child, or on how to be a proper man or woman, to see that the belief that proper roles for each gender could – and should – be learned was current. Since Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) at least, this conscious shaping of children into gendered beings based on sex difference has also been the subject of critique. On a simplified level, the Victorian notion of roles for men and women is not that far from Butler's language of performance. This is not to suggest that the articulation that second and third-wave theories give to concepts of gender was pre-empted by the Victorians, but rather that the key problems of whether and how to differentiate masculinity and femininity from each other, and how each should be valued, have been part of the discussion since before feminism existed as a term or description.⁷ Looking at the ways in which concepts that would be taken up in second and third wave feminism co-exist in Gaskell's thinking is similarly a way to negotiate contradictions between gender as identity and gender as performance. As we shall see, Gaskell is interested in validating the feminine and womanly as a category different from the masculine and manly, but also in illuminating the performative nature of both masculinity and femininity. However, rather than seeking to do away with the categories, she envisions them as necessary complements, and the performance of a specific gender as a useful and potentially empowering aspect of existence. The very notion of different roles for different genders is what cultivates agency.

The concept of agency and its relationship to other ideas, forms, or aspects of power, authority, and control are similarly fraught with complexities. These problematics suggest the importance of the theme as a site for exploration. What I am calling agency is simply the ability to effect specific change and accomplish a particular end or ends. Agency tends to take place on a personal level; that is, it involves the actions of individuals and works to solve or resolve individual problems, usually one at a time. Still, these individual accomplishments can accumulate into the impetus for larger scale social or institutional revolution and resolution. This

⁷ The term was coined in France in the 1880s, and first appeared in England in the 1890s.

may appear to be an overly simplistic and inclusive definition of agency, as it allows for all kinds of actions, whether they are physical or intellectual or somewhere in between, that have different outcomes and larger or smaller effects, to count as part of the same category and to deserve the same amount of praise. I will complicate the definition shortly, but part of the point that is evident from the analysis of Gaskell's texts is that actions which may appear to be lesser are in fact just as important as those which appear to make a greater impact. I differentiate between agency and power, suggesting that if agency is the ability to accomplish a certain end, power is more intrinsically concerned with the claim to be able to attain what one desires. Power can be personal, but it also operates on social, ideological, and institutional levels, and involves conceptions of its own authority. Individual power, for my purposes, is that which is ideologically defined based on categories such as wealth, class, gender, race, and profession. Thus, according to conventions at play during the Victorian era and arguably still today, a person who is male, rich, and aristocratic is by virtue of these facts a powerful individual, regardless of what he as an individual actually manages to accomplish. In other terms, one might understand this concept of power as that which is bestowed and maintained by belief in itself; as privilege which is such because individuals are conditioned to believe it is so. In Gaskell, because of the responsibilities attached to this notion of power as authority and its desire to consolidate itself, it regularly becomes an inhibition or limit to agency, restricting individuals from the actions they should be able to perform. Characters regularly have power, but little or no agency.

Gaskell's position is a liberal and humanist one in that she presents agency as the result of individual or personal struggle and choice, rather than acknowledging the work of ideology. While she does not overtly subscribe to a Marxist notion of the absolute control of ideologies over the individual and thus the importance of social change rather than individual action, Gaskell's suggestion that power can be limiting does reflect a recognition of the constraints that larger systems of belief can exercise over individuals. By conceiving agency as outside of power and in fact alternative to power, Gaskell consistently points to what Rosemary Hennessy, developing theories of ideology from Althusser and Gramsci, identifies as the "slips or cracks in [the] coherence" of hegemonic ideology (76). This allows for the possibility of a feminist critique. Hennessy suggests that as "an ideological practice, critique issues from these cracks, historicizes them, and claims them as the basis for alternate narratives" (92). By reading Gaskell's configuration of power and agency thus – as hegemonic ideology and one of the cracks

to be found in it – we can see her work as more than an uncomplicated liberal validation of the actions and abilities of individual female characters, though they are the subjects of her novels. What might then be considered hegemonic ideology is represented in Gaskell's work as official forms of power, expectations, responsibilities, moral and religious belief systems that limit individual agency. In this way, there is a recognition that larger systems of thought and belief do affect individual abilities. Conventional power is, through multiple social and legal systems, bestowed on men, and so men end up in various situations where they are unable to act, while women are able to do so, creating an irony or paradox within a society that perceives action as masculine and passivity as feminine. This is consistently the case within the varied social settings and scenarios in Gaskell's writing, though each specific case presents a set of complications of its own. In suggesting that agency is more often found in the gender that is defined as being less powerful and more passive, especially when it comes to immediate and individual actions, Gaskell finds a means to challenge the prevalent gender ideology, reevaluating the nature of power and what it means to possess it.

Though my study is new in that its focus is specifically on female agency in Gaskell, it fits into a tradition of critical re-evaluation of the writings of Victorian women that seeks to understand how such writings interacted with societal and political issues surrounding the roles, rights, and abilities of women, and to consider the ways in which they might challenge the kinds of patriarchal traditions that pervaded Victorian society and its controlling ideologies. These studies seek to redefine notions of power and agency and reveal aspects of these in the feminine. Judith Lowder Newton's 1981 book *Women, Power, and Subversion* suggests that women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not simply victims of oppression and points out that to "insist upon women's power in the past, and in the present, is to challenge the most dominant and most entrenched of social relations" (xix). Newton considers the nineteenth-century commonplace belief, especially prevalent in women's etiquette and instruction books, that women's power lay in their influence, especially their moral influence, over the men in their lives. Her analysis of four novels by women instead locates that power in the ability or agency of the heroines. Newton goes on to suggest that by "examining both the text's subversion of ideology and its adherence to it... we may come to some understanding of the degree to which female writers may have acted as agents or arbiters of change" (14). What Newton describes as power is often derived from instances of personal agency, although Gaskell's work is not on the

list of novels that she examines. Certainly, though, the recognition of the importance of understanding both that Victorian women were not simply victims of oppression, and that the power they had was socially circumscribed and defined is essential to my reading. I will suggest that Gaskell's answer to that power struggle is to insist on *doing*, and often on doing for someone else, which complicates the issue. Here my argument parts ways with Newton's, because for her female self-sacrifice is limiting to female power, whereas I find that in Gaskell it can be a point of inspiration for agency that is not limiting but rather liberating. I expand upon Newton's conception of power to include the further alternative of powerlessness.

Mary Poovey's and Elizabeth Langland's pioneering re-thinkings of Victorian feminine power also contribute to this study. In *Uneven Developments* (1988), Poovey examines the ideological assumptions behind institutions such as the legal and medical systems that emphasised a biological and natural difference between the sexes. She notices that while this insistence on the intrinsic caring and maternal nature of women meant that they were expected to be happy only as wives and mothers, it was a "contradictory ideal" that could be and was used to "authorize ambitions" that allowed women a way out of the domestic sphere (12). Poovey argues that when it comes to fiction, gender ideology and the maternal ideal allowed for constructed subversions of themselves. Thus Poovey suggests that the doctrines developed "unevenly," in that they were pushed in literature by two different interests. Femininity becomes a means to seize what had been masculine power. In *Nobody's Angels* (1995), Langland looks at how women are implicated in class relations and oppression. Her re-evaluation of the domestic world "takes what has seemed to many a trivial world of etiquette, household management, and charitable visiting and reveals how effectively power may operate when its manifestations appear insignificant and inconsequential" (8). Langland examines "the role the novel played in sustaining mythologies of the middle-class homemaker even as it exposed through rupture and tensions the very mythology it sedulously portrayed" (21). Langland devotes a chapter to Gaskell's *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, suggesting that they demonstrate the "social productivity" (113) and the "socially managed mobility" (147) that fell within feminine control. The domestic realm, women's place in it, and the ways in which women and novelists negotiated them, are, all of these critics agree, complex. For each of them there are limits to the freedom, independence, and fulfillment that women can achieve under expectations that insisted on keeping them tied to the domestic sphere and the ideal of domestic femininity. On the other hand,

each of these critics finds evidence in the literature of the period that suggests that those limits could be challenged, adapted, and re-appraised so that the feminine realm, while remaining in many ways separate from the masculine, could usurp much of the power, influence, and responsibility that was traditionally assigned to the masculine.⁸ Because Gaskell's work is very much located in the domestic sphere, while it is diverse in form and subject, she has much to contribute to our understanding of power within the feminine realm, whether or not it should move beyond that realm, and how it might do so. Furthermore, Gaskell's life, unlike those of many of the more canonical Victorian women writers,⁹ was fully entrenched in that traditionally domestic realm, making her career as a highly successful author¹⁰ a more significant challenge to the limits of that realm. Gaskell participates in femininity on both a personal and a creative level, but not without also confronting the expectations of what it means to be a woman, as well as what it means to be a man.

Gender roles were conventionally defined and circumscribed during the Victorian period, and though there is plenty of evidence that the lived experiences of men and women transcended and contradicted, in addition to conforming to and perpetuating these roles, stereotypical images and behaviours of femininity and masculinity pervaded the culture of the period. While this study seeks to complicate understandings of Victorian gender roles, as have most studies of gender in the period, in order to do so some familiarity with the ideals of masculinity and femininity is an essential beginning point. One of the keys to considering expectations of

⁸ It is important to note that my discussion of agency in Gaskell for the most part pertains to the middle-class feminine realm. While in chapter two I consider agency in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* as it pertains to working-class women, Gaskell's own position as a member of the middle class makes difficult any claims for any actual or lived experience of working-class women. The ideology of separate spheres was one that developed in the middle class, and so proto-feminist engagements with it are also limited in their scope.

⁹ Writers like the Brontë sisters and George Eliot, for example, led lives that in many ways were outside of what was expected of women in Victorian society.

¹⁰ One way in which Gaskell's own agency has come to the attention of critics is in the encounters she had with her publishers and the ways in which she – successfully and not so successfully – managed her own authorial career. Hilary Schor's 1992 book *Scheherazade in the Marketplace* explores Gaskell's negotiation of the literary marketplace in her dealings with publishers, editors, praise, and criticism. Schor sees Gaskell as a key figure in a transformation of the world of publishing and its expectations of women, and she sees that transformation as related to one in the woman's novel and what it could be expected to accomplish. The following year Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund also consider Gaskell in a similar context, discussing "the innovative and subversive narratives she wrought on the material ground of Victorian publishing" (7). Like Schor, they are interested in the way Gaskell took on the publishing world and the world of literary celebrity in order "gradually to offer her own version of 'the writer' and 'the woman author'" (8). They suggest that Gaskell's diversity of genre and especially her related diversity in the physical forms that her publications took broke new ground for writers of both genders. Hughes and Lund consider Gaskell's own fight for space in Victorian publishing as well as the agency of her books in pushing for change in terms of her "work" and "effort" (10), terms which emphasise her focus on doing.

femininity and masculinity is to recognise how different they were in everything from outward appearance, physical, emotional, and intellectual capacity, talents, aspirations, and desires, to the sphere of life in which a person participated. Men were supposed to be rugged, strong, rational rather than emotional, abstract and critical thinkers, ambitious, and part of the public spheres of industry, economy, and politics. Women were expected to be delicate, gentle, caring and emotional, selfless and devoted to the wellbeing of others, and part of the personal sphere of domestic comfort, moral influence, and social management.¹¹ In *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), John Ruskin sets forth the “separate characters” of men and women:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure.... But the woman’s power is for rule... and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise (77)

Samuel Smiles makes similar distinctions in his 1871 *Character*, arguing that “Man is the brain, but woman is the heart of humanity; he its judgment, she its feeling; he its strength, she its grace, ornament, and solace. Even the understanding of the best woman seems to work mainly through her affections” (38). As Ruskin and Smiles present them, the masculine and feminine attributes are at least on the surface balanced, but the idea that women’s character and their talents, though they complimented men’s, were also lesser or inferior to them, was dominant.¹² This is certainly the view voiced by the king¹³ in Tennyson’s *The Princess* (1847), who insists, “Man with the head and woman with the heart: / Man to command and woman to obey; / All else confusion” (403). The epitome of Victorian femininity, Queen Victoria, recognizes woman’s inferior position, writing in 1858 to her recently married daughter “there is great happiness and great blessedness in devoting oneself to another... still men are very selfish and the woman’s devotion is always one of submission which makes our poor sex so very unenviable” (Fulford 44). Queen

¹¹ As Martha Vicinus puts it, in “her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth” (ix) as well as a ““natural” submission to authority and innate maternal instincts” (x).

¹² John Tosh argues that the “dominant belief in Victorian England was that women were not only inferior to men, but fundamentally different from them. They were not just a few notches lower on the scale of rationality and resolution, but set apart from the superior sex by natural endowment for specific tasks requiring distinctive attributes” (43).

¹³ Tennyson’s poem is about coming to terms with balances of gender and power. The king represents traditional ways of thinking about gender that are critically examined in the poem, if not entirely overcome.

Victoria finishes on a note of acceptance, however, believing “it cannot be otherwise as God has willed it so” (44). Hierarchical position, as well as difference in character, was to be taken as given, even by the queen herself.

In both the private, personal world and in the public and social world, masculinity and femininity were constructed as opposites that allowed for and answered moral and practical divisions; however, these gender stereotypes were always facing challenges and revisions. Tosh argues that the ideals are “shot through with contradictions” (47) and from Vicinus’s note that “the clearest characteristic of the mid-Victorian period was how few women of character fit the ideal lady” (xi) to Herbert Sussman’s insistence on multiple and contradictory “plural masculinities” (8), the great majority of analyses of Victorian gender find the ideals of masculinity and femininity challenged at every turn in the historical and literary record. They are finally only stereotypes or ideals and are constantly complicated. Nevertheless, as I proceed with my discussion of Gaskell’s ideas about gender, I will refer to these ideals as the conventional or traditional images against which or in accordance with which her conceptions work. Thus the terms masculine and feminine, for the purposes of this dissertation, refer to the Victorian cultural constructs of those ideals of what men and women are expected to be. I use the terms “womanly” and “manly”¹⁴ to indicate Gaskell’s own gender ideals when they differ from the norms of femininity and masculinity defined by her society. The terms male and female are used to denote sex difference. The overlap between some of the ideas and the contradictions within the concept of one overarching definition of each gender category, even as an ideal, make the terms imperfect, yet understanding the basic ideas of what masculinity and femininity meant to most Victorians, even if they disagreed, allows for renegotiations.

Gaskell’s conceptions of gender and agency arise out of contemporary discussion and debate over these ideals, as writers and thinkers were very much engaged in determining whether and how power should be divided between men and women. Particularly contentious was the debate over how to value the different kinds of work that were accomplished within the separate and gendered spheres of the home and the outside world. Many felt that there was no good

¹⁴ The OED suggests that while each of these terms denotes distinct gender attributes such as strength, courage, and frankness (manly), and gentleness, timidity, and nurturance (womanly), each also evokes older connotations of humanity, or humanely. The emphasis on a distinction in outward behavior with the underlying sense of connection in the ideal of humaneness is very appropriate to Gaskell’s view of gender roles.

reason that women's work should not be appreciated equally with men's.¹⁵ As late as 1880 Margaret Oliphant points out the injustice of the double standard: "Servants have a right to their wages, and to have it understood that their work is honest and thorough... but wives must allow it to be taken for granted that they do nothing; that their work is the merest trifle not worth reckoning in the tale of human exertions" ("Grievances" 209). John Stuart Mill, in "The Subjection of Women" (1869), likens the situation of women to the impressment of sailors (350) because they are not paid due salary or given due respect for the difficult and important work that they do, nor are they given any other option or alternative to the domestic role.¹⁶ A rather different argument was that the work middle-class women were expected to do to keep them busy in the home was in fact useless and unimportant and did not possess the potential to give them a sense of real fulfillment, and that instead of attempting to infuse domestic drudgery with false value, women should have the same right as men to pursue other professions and callings. This viewpoint presents women's days as killingly monotonous and trivial, and suggests that they need something to do outside of the home that is productive and fulfilling, if only as a means to keep them from madness. This is what Florence Nightingale argues in *Cassandra* (1852) and what Elizabeth Barrett Browning sums up in *Aurora Leigh* in 1857, the same year that Gaskell published the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Men's association with the public realm and the work they did there was presented as a useful release of energy and a way to keep it under control, but as Martin Danahay explains "while work was seen as an antidote to temptation for men, it was viewed as having the opposite effect on women... often represented as releasing a dangerous sexuality" (7). Thus it was imperative that femininity be defined at least partially as in contrast to men's work. Newton sums up the difference, saying "women, in their isolation from competitive economic practices, were to act as the conscience of bourgeois society and through their influence over men mitigate the harshness of the industrial capitalist world" (19).

¹⁶ While Oliphant and Mill advocate for the value of the work that women do inside of the home, others simply point out that in spite of all the assumptions that women could not be happy or fulfilled with work outside of the domestic sphere, many women were living their lives doing just that. Harriet Martineau's "Independent Industry of Women" (1859) claims that half of the women of England do work for their living, and that many of these are members of the middle class (225). Frances Power Cobbe, in 1862, goes so far as to suggest that women might find fulfillment in duties other than those performed for their own families. She says an unmarried woman "feels that in the power of devoting her whole time and energies to some benevolent task, she is enabled to effect perhaps some greater good than would otherwise have been possible" ("Celibacy" 56). The nature of the work is the same, and the motivation as well, for Cobbe's single woman is inspired by a feminine feeling of benevolence; however, to suggest that there is a greater good, and further, that women have the power to bring it about, than the raising of a family or the care of and devotion to a husband, is quite a step. The benevolent, charitable, or otherwise specifically care-oriented sort of work that Cobbe and others like her promoted, while there were still many objections to it if it took women away from their own families, did become one of the first kinds of duty that was acceptable for women to do, whether remunerated or not.

¹⁷ Gaskell's epigraph to *The Life* is taken from Barrett Browning's poem, and much of the discussion of women's role as artist or writer in the biography draws on the discussion presented in *Aurora Leigh*. The quotation is "Oh my

The works of women are symbolical.
 We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
 Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
 To put on when you're weary – or a stool
 To stumble over and vex you ... "curse that stool!"
 Or else, at best, a cushion, where you lean
 And sleep, and dream of something we are not
 But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
 This hurts most, this – that, after all, we are paid
 The worth of our work, perhaps. (1.456- 65)

The problem for Barrett Browning and Nightingale is they feel the valuelessness of the things women do. Harriet Martineau, similarly, speaking of her own experience of her family's financial ruin, feels it was "one of the best things that ever happened to us" (*Autobiography* 126). She claims that poverty and the necessity for work outside of her parents' home meant the "blessing of a wholly new freedom," that "there was scope for action," and that suddenly she found that she "truly lived instead of vegetated" (126). To embrace poverty and ruin as an improvement in her situation suggests Martineau's strong impression of the soul-stifling experience of the idle lady. In its own turn, though, this idea is contested by staunch advocates of the domestic sphere who claim that if a woman is bored or dissatisfied with her role in the home the problem lies with her, or with the very suggestion that she might play a different role, but not with that natural and proper place that she should rightfully keep and be happy in.

This argument was often articulated in the insistence that a woman should be proud to do her duty as a wife, mother, and housekeeper, without expecting praise. Rather, she should recognize the satisfaction of caring for her family as her fulfillment. This way of thinking finds one of its strongest advocates in Sarah Stickney Ellis,¹⁸ whose conduct books *The Women of England* (1839) and *The Wives of England* (1843) encouraged women that they too could be heroes, but with the catch that women's heroism is silent and self-sacrificing, though perhaps

God / ... / Thou hast knowledge, only thou / How dreary 'tis for women to sit still / On winter nights by solitary fires / And hear the nations praising them far off" (*Aurora Leigh* 5. 434, 439-41).

¹⁸ Ellis was the daughter of a Quaker father, who encouraged her in artistic and intellectual pursuits as well as domestic ones. She grew up to be a prolific writer of fiction, conduct books, essays on aestheticism, and a cookbook, among other things. The fact that Ellis's writing career helped to support both her father's family and later her husband's shows that in practice she recognized some motivation for women to participate in spheres other than the domestic (ODNB).

more admirable even than men's. In "warning the women of England back to their domestic duties, in order that they may become better wives" and "more useful daughters," she insists that in those duties and the effective performance of them exists "all which is most lovely, poetical, and interesting, nay, even *heroic* in women" (*Women* 39). Ellis insists that women's heroism must be silent, unsung, and selfless, but she imagines in feminine heroes "an almost super-human energy [with which they] could trample under-foot every impediment that intervened between them and the accomplishment of some great object... related only to some beloved object" (64). Women can and should do great things, but they must be inspired by the motive of doing them for others. Thus it is Ellis's conclusion that a woman can never "be great in herself – personally, and without instrumentality – as an object, not an agent" (64). Ellis does not deny women power. In fact, she implies that it is because women represent the stronger of the genders that they are able to act selflessly and without celebration or acclaim, but she gives them only the power of agency, and distinguishes it from power for their own sakes. They are not ends, but means.¹⁹ This is the complicated atmosphere out of which Gaskell's fiction emerges to grapple, each piece in its own way, with the expectations and challenges faced by women. As I will show, she supports the maintenance of separate spheres, although she also creates situations in which the boundaries break down. Like Ellis, Gaskell believes that women's satisfaction should be found in their acceptance of the feminine role, and that from the sacrifice of authority, agency is gained. She complicates matters even more by an awareness of how gender and power are both constructs and by revealing a certain powerlessness that is intrinsic to authority. Poovey argues that Victorian ideology "was both contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making, it was always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formulations" (3). Similarly, Gaskell's conception of gender and power as constructs allows her to see them as fluid.

Gaskell is keenly interested in valuing conventional feminine work, and expresses regret that domestic work is not perceived in the same light of genius as are other kinds of work, while noticing too that this lack of perception is ennobling. This is evident in her reflections on the

¹⁹ Ellis also does not deny that women may be dissatisfied. She finds that they are "less influential, less useful, and less happy than they were" (*Women* 10). She condemns this "morbid listlessness of mind" (12) and, anticipating the outcry of women like Nightingale and Barrett Browning, suggests the error of women's "perpetually lamenting their own inability to do good" (17). Ellis's cure for the faults that she finds in the "useless," "inanimate," "ignorant," (79) and "languid, listless, and inert young ladies" (83) is a course of action, but action within the domestic sphere of duties, not outside of it.

Nightingale sisters. While Gaskell met Florence Nightingale, and admired her,²⁰ she came to know her sister Parthenope rather better, and felt that a larger share of praise should be due Parthenope than she regularly got in the shadow of her famous sister:

To set F. at liberty to do her great work, Parthe has annihilated herself, her own tastes, her own wishes in order to take up all the little duties of home, to parents, to poor, to society, to servants – all the small things that fritter away time and life, *all* these Parthe does, for fear if anything was neglected people might blame F. as well as from feeling these duties imperative as if they were grand things. (317)

Here Gaskell's admiration of Parthenope is not only because of the work she does – and Gaskell carefully points out that it is as much and as difficult as Florence's work in the nursing field and in fighting for her rights as a woman to be there – but also for the fact that she gives up something of herself in order to do her sister's share as well. Thus, while Florence's work makes her into a larger-than-life being, Parthenope's seems rather to subsume her own being in feminine service to her sister who has taken on a masculine role. On the other hand, Parthenope has the advantage of being able to feel that what she does is grand as well. Gaskell describes Parthenope as "plain, clever, and *apparently* nothing out of the common way as to character; but she *is* for all that" (317). What Gaskell sees as admirable in Parthenope's personality is her willingness selflessly to give up her own interests so that her sister can go out and be great, and so that Florence cannot be faulted for abandoning her domestic role. Gaskell appreciates that the sacrifice on Parthenope's part is not likely to be seen or celebrated by the world at large, which makes it all the more worthy in her eyes. Thus, for all the great change that Florence effects, Gaskell values Parthenope as even perhaps a nobler person, for quietly doing what needs to be done at home. Gaskell recognizes that uncelebrated agency does not belong exclusively to women, as she describes her husband William's dread of speaking at a meeting of the British Association:

If he does *not* go to London it will be because he is frightened away by it.
Speechmaking, public-meetings and such noisy obtrusive ways of 'doing

²⁰ Gaskell thought Florence Nightingale was a kind of heroine, but was reluctant to concede that women in general could be as successful as she was in what Gaskell still saw as the masculine domain of medicine. She declares herself "*not* a friend of female medical education" because in her opinion "women have no judgment. They've tact and sensitiveness and genius, and hundreds of fine and lovely qualities, but are at best angelic geese as to matters requiring serious and long scientific consideration" (*Letters* 419). On the other hand, she writes to Parthenope "all words are poor in speaking of her acts. I can only say once more God bless her and you" (*Letters* 383).

good' are his dislike, as you know; but oh! he is so good really in his own quiet way, beginning at home and working outward without noise or hubbub – I am more and more convinced *be[ing]* good & *doing* good comes naturally, & need not be fussed and spoken about. (*Letters* 188)

Unobtrusive, unsung, and silent ways of doing good are here celebrated, while the frightening hubbub of the British Association looks self-serving and crass. While her fictional accounts tend to endow female characters with silent agency, her discovery of it in William reinforces her own awareness that while it is gendered feminine, it need not only be found in women.

William and Elizabeth's religion has particular relevance to the topics of gender and agency, as, since they were dissenters from the Church of England, Unitarians were prevented from holding official kinds of power until 1829. Elizabeth was of course a Unitarian minister's daughter and in marrying William became a Unitarian minister's wife. A more detailed discussion of the Gaskells' feelings about religious doctrine, Unitarian and otherwise, and how it pertains to gender and to agency takes place in chapter three; however, a very basic overview of the connections is useful here. Generally the equation is made between Gaskell's faith and the prominence of themes of religious and social tolerance in her fiction, because of the faith's strong reputation for liberal and egalitarian beliefs and practices. It is important also to her conception of gender, because the Unitarian faith was centered on intellectual development, education, and knowledge for both sexes, so that through learning and discovery of their world, men and women could come to know God. Thus Unitarian women, Gaskell among them, were generally more educated than other women of the period, often exposed to classical languages and the same kinds of reading as their brothers and fathers. It is important to note, however, as Kathryn Gleadle does in her book *The Early Feminists* (1995), that in spite of their liberal ideals, within Unitarian homes women were still generally considered subordinate to men, and the knowledge they gained through their education was primarily meant to equip them to be competent to take an interest in their husbands' interests. Gaskell's sense of what constitutes good and what doing good work means also comes from her religion. While most Victorians would agree, in principle at least,²¹ that to better the lives of those around them was the duty of every Christian, and while charitable work of various kinds was extremely popular, Unitarians

²¹ The conflict between this principle and the other prominent belief in self-sufficiency and individual effort and ambition is discussed in chapter one.

were particularly involved in practical schemes to help their fellows. Finally, Gaskell's religious background is relevant to my reading of her conception of agency in that Unitarians tended to focus on practical and immediate solutions to problems; that is, action as opposed to theory, and that until the repeal of the Test Acts in 1829, to be Unitarian was to sacrifice the opportunity of graduating from University or participating in politics or public office. Gaskell's faith was one that for a good part of her life was officially powerless, although still active and insistent on working for practical good. Unitarians insisted upon agency even when they were without power.

In her fiction, Gaskell approaches the issue of gender and agency within different contexts, and as the contexts change so too does the relationship between masculinity, femininity, and the ability to act, and the corresponding responsibilities and expectations accorded to men and women. Thus my approach to the topic is divided along the lines of the defining ideas of Gaskell's different works – class struggle within an industrial context in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), sexual morality and the figure of the fallen woman in “Lizzie Leigh” (1850) and *Ruth* (1853), religious devotion, marriage, and carnal lust in “Libbie Marsh's Three Eras” (1847), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) and “Lois the Witch” (1859), and finally domesticity and its relationship to gender identity and power in *Cranford* (1853), “A Fear for the Future” (1859), and *Wives and Daughters* (1865). In handling the material in terms of the major themes, which are all major concerns of the Victorian period, I am able to expose the balance of gender and agency as a constant in a body of work that is extraordinarily diverse in its interests, and to explore the ways in which those ideas change and evolve. As Gaskell takes on the different preoccupations of her day, she returns to the relationship between gender and agency as a source of both problems and solutions. The organization of my chapters follows the complexity of her arguments, which increases as she moves from industrial and social issues to personal, spiritual, and domestic ones. It is also roughly chronological, beginning with her first novel and ending with her last, but I have strayed from strict chronology in order to study works that focus on similar issues together. This strategy allows me to chart progression within each chapter as well as over the entire study. The fact that the complexity to an extent reflects the chronology suggests the evolution of Gaskell's thoughts. Each chapter deals with more than one

work in order to express the differences as well as the consistencies in Gaskell's thinking about gender within these various contexts.²²

I begin with a discussion of the restriction of masculine power which leads to the cultivation of feminine agency out of a sense of necessity in Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, and in her other industrial novel *North and South*. In these works, I examine how Gaskell attacks the economic system which paradoxically prevents men, both owners and workers, who are expected to be able to act in the economic realm, earning food for their families and producing goods for their society, from being able to effect any real action or do any good. Economic institutions which are meant to allow for productivity and action prove instead to be limiting, as strikes, market fluctuations, and greed grind everything to a halt. In contrast, however, precisely because they are not expected to have any power within the economic, political, or legal realm, the women in these situations are endowed with agency that the men do not possess. The difference between women who act and men who are paralyzed in these works is striking, as the pressures of economic responsibility oppress those whom they are supposed to empower. The distinction in agency between men and women is quite clear in these works, but the message is that it is the systems of industry, economics, and the capitalist world view that need to be reformed, not that gendered roles within it need to be reconsidered.

As the industrial novels suggest that only women are able to act effectively within a society whose economic system is prone to stagnation, *Ruth* and "Lizzie Leigh," which are concerned with another social problem, that of the fallen woman, and are the focus of my second chapter, show how it is easier for women to act within a system of morality that holds men responsible for the consolidation of masculine power, in the process stripping them of their ability to act on an individual, sympathetic level. Like the industrial novels, these works pit active women against men who cannot act or refuse to do so. The context of the story of a woman's seduction and subsequent disgrace and redemption, though it is to an extent situated more closely to the feminine realm of the domestic and personal, family life, is nevertheless dealt with to a large degree on the level of masculine responsibilities to society, religion, and morality. The limits involved in possessing the kinds of moral authority that two particular male characters, a minister and a business leader, are expected to hold, are revealed. Women who hold

²² Additionally, it allows for analyses of several of Gaskell's short works, which have not received very much critical attention.

no official power are instead the ones who are able to bring about change and resolution. Further, the transgressive gender traits of the Benson siblings and the challenges *Ruth* presents to the traditional romance trajectory of a woman's life, fallen or otherwise, show Gaskell's growing interest in redefining static expectations of gender. In chapters one and two I will suggest that gender remains the relatively unquestioned default difference, while ideas about class relationships and moral responsibilities undergo scrutiny and are pushed to change. However, because alternate ways of being are necessary to prevent stagnation, these changes can only come about if the power relations of gender are retained.

The ideas get progressively more complicated in the texts which deal more intimately with psychological issues of personal responsibility and interpersonal relationships, without the distraction of a specific social issue or problem. The primary texts that I discuss in chapter three, "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras," *Sylvia's Lovers*, and "Lois the Witch," explore the ways in which religious belief can be used to skew gendered power. I focus on Gaskell's own Unitarian faith and how it influences her conception of men's and women's roles within religion, as they interact with personal questions of faith and action. The Christian tradition that says it is the role of the husband in a marriage to not only be responsible for his wife when it comes to worldly provisions, but that he is also her spiritual conduit to God, is put to the test in these works as Gaskell tries to balance personal agency with religious and marital duty and spiritual need. Lust and the confusion and conflation of morality, religion, and sexual desire reveal the dangers of believing that spiritual fulfillment is dependent on the relationships between men and women. When marriage becomes a means to restrict spiritual agency, Gaskell is at her most pessimistic and least able to suggest a positive view or solution. In this chapter I also consider how Gaskell negotiates between a recognition of certain religious doctrines as a means of limiting agency, and faith itself as potential for agency. Issues of determinism and free will come into play here, as do expectations of gender as defined by specific Christian traditions. This chapter explores how religion interferes with matters of gender and agency and the circumscription of human power in the face of higher authority.

The works discussed in the final chapter provide for the most complex analysis of the subject because they are about the everyday relationships between men and women. Thus, the division of power is not obscured or altered by factors of economic or moral instability as it is in the social problem novels, nor is it complicated by the dictates of religious practice, as it is in

chapter three. Making gender, and specifically the powers that women possess within the realms where they are expected to hold some sway – the home and private society – the focus of the works does not serve, however, to simplify the issues. Rather, in these works Gaskell achieves her most complicated position, showing specifically to what extent gender is socially constructed and that what are taken to be natural feminine graces or natural masculine strengths are actually artificially practiced with various selfish or altruistic ends in view. The acknowledgement of the constructed nature of gender, however, does not mean that it is condemned. This chapter considers the conscious embracement of differences between men and women, especially in regard to the conception and construction of power, as a means by which to enhance solidarity and to create the ability to act sympathetically. In these works, the power of the officially powerless is articulated most clearly, and in their own terms. The limitations of that power and the sacrifices made to sustain it are also explored. Gaskell celebrates traditional femininity and endows it with agency, but at the same time she suggests its artificial nature and the potential dangers that can arise both from buying into it absolutely and from attempting to deny it and to create an identity outside of gendered expectations. Thus, the later chapters pick up the somewhat easier relationships between gender and power explored in the first two, and reveal the complications inherent in a system that assigns power based on sexual difference. Gender remains the default difference between power and agency in personal relationships, but Gaskell insists that there is value and necessity in both masculinity and femininity. While there are problems with organizing power relations in this way, she reveals how the benefits justify the cost. Female agency arises as a necessary reaction to institutional problems that are inhibiting men from acting in the works discussed in chapters one and two, and it takes place in conventionally masculine realms though it is rooted in feminine values which are transferred to those realms. Chapters three and four are more closely concerned with the psychological reasons behind and the effects of gender categories and how individuals create their own definitions of power and authority within personal and spiritual relationships. In each case, Gaskell places value on the point of view and the ability that is cultivated in the feminine world through a sense of personal sympathy, sacrifice, or subversion.

In my discussion of female agency as a theme in Gaskell's work and in her life, my point is primarily to show how she complicates ideas of agency and authority when it comes to gender, and to suggest that her conceptions present a useful way of thinking about the relationship. By

claiming agency as part of the feminine domain, while simultaneously suggesting the agency inherent in recognizing gender roles as constructed, performed, or even false, Gaskell presents a different way of understanding gender as an individual choice within an ideological system. The objection to this kind of thinking in general is that it calls for personal rather than systematic change and can thus be perceived to place the burden of responsibility for progress on the very group of people who are facing limitations or oppressions. Just as advocating for personal action over political seems both to oversimplify the complicated nature of oppression, especially oppression that is ideologically enforced, and to ignore the fact that for many, such personal action may well be impossible, suggesting that to possess authority in any socially or institutionally official capacity is to limit agency appears to excuse oppressive and exclusionary ways of being. The opposite idea consistently emerges in Gaskell's fiction, however, and that is that focusing only on the political or institutional ramifications and solutions to a problem, and defining value and fulfillment only in terms of conventional authority or power – masculinity, physical strength, economic sway – is to ignore and exclude the very real, very potent, very necessary perspective of the feminine. While she is focused on the female individual as the locus of agency, the male individual who is stymied by the very belief systems that proclaim his power is evidence of Gaskell's recognition of ideological sway and the gaps between it and lived experience. In turning her pen to issues of social change – most overtly in the industrial novels but also in the domestic works – Gaskell implicitly credits the influential work of ideology that changes the world through the promotion of beliefs or ideas. After all, fiction itself is a cultural tool of ideology; one that can enforce or challenge hegemonic modes of thinking or beliefs. Finding agency in powerlessness may also appear to be nothing more than a compromise; a way to reconcile women to the role they seem required to play, or an easy way out of the problem of gender inequity that does not overtly challenge the *status quo*. While I do not deny that Gaskell's desire seems to be for balance, and that at times she approaches the issue from perspectives that attempt to make the best of things, or even cry "sour grapes,"²³ the depth of her arguments on the subject suggest more than just a desire for easy compromise or dismissal. She dissects and analyses the issue in serious and dedicated ways, showing the drawbacks and even tragedies of

²³ Mary Smith, the narrator of *Cranford*, points out that the villagers' devotion to the sort of gentility that their poverty enforced is "a sort of sour-grapeism, which made us feel very peaceful and satisfied" (8). This idea is discussed in the context of *Cranford* in chapter four, but the sense that even sour grapes can be a positive reaction allowing for a sense of satisfaction is applicable to Gaskell's ideas in general and to my argument here.

the system as well as the potential advantages, utility, and fulfillment that this division of power and agency can bring. By believing in femininity as a valuable and necessary alternative to masculinity, she also extends the compromise to both genders. Gaskell's consistent depictions of strong and effective female agency throughout her fiction is a model if not of radical change, of radical renegotiation and reappraisal of the roles that men and women play. Her contribution not only to Victorian concepts of gender but to contemporary ones is to insist on the utility of a diversity of perspectives and a balance of ways of approaching the world. That she does not overtly conceive of such a balance in a way that transcends the assigning of gender by sex – men as masculine and women as feminine – is surprising only because she does recognize gender roles as socially constructed and defined.²⁴ This combination of acute perception of how gender works, with her sense that it can be made to work, and the depth and variety of situations and circumstances in which she interrogates these ideas, makes Gaskell's own perspective distinctive and worthy of careful consideration.

²⁴ The Benson siblings in *Ruth* and the alternative marriage-like situation between two women at the end of "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" are examples of the ways in which Gaskell does come close to suggesting gender roles can and should be independent of sex.

Chapter One

“What could we *not* do”: Gender, Industry, and Agency in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*

Gaskell’s two industrial novels take on issues of economic class conflict, one of the most prominent concerns of Victorian society, politics, and fiction, and at the same time they reveal Gaskell’s vision of how gender and agency are related and the potential of that relationship in solving such conflict. It is common for critics of Gaskell’s work to consider *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) together because their subject matter and setting in Northern industrial towns connect the two while separating them from the rest of Gaskell’s major works. The fact that though both novels are about the relationships between men who are involved in the ownership or management of mills or factories and men who supply the labour in such institutions – owners and workers²⁵ –, the protagonists are women, and the industrial issues are perceived from their point of view, at once indicates Gaskell’s interest in women’s role in this economic struggle. Mary Barton is not immediately involved in the clashes, confrontations, or conversations surrounding labour issues in *Mary Barton*, but she is very deeply concerned in working out the consequences. In *North and South*, Margaret Hale involves herself in every aspect of the disputes and their repercussions and resolutions. In considering the social problem of industrial relations, Gaskell herself moves into the masculine realm, but from her disingenuous claim²⁶ to “know nothing of political economy” in her preface to *Mary Barton* (30), she also insists on presenting her fiction and opinions from a deferential, compromising, feminine position. This strategy of approaching the problem from a position outside of authority is reflected in the action of the novels, as women are turned to in order to effect resolutions to problems in the conventionally masculine realm of economics, precisely because they are outside of that realm. In both novels, as the energies of the male owners and workers are sapped by the disillusionment and frustration of the disagreements between them, physical – and moral – idleness on the workers’ part leads to violence and pain, while moral – and physical – idleness on the owners’ part, because it leads to the workers’ idleness, is even worse. All of this inability

²⁵ The terms that Gaskell uses most often are “masters” and “men,” although she uses “owners” and “workers” occasionally as well. I have chosen the latter as my terms because I think they more effectively describe how the two groups of people are related to each other, through their relationships to the mills in these books. The idea of masters and men suggests a hierarchical power relationship, whereas owners and workers designate in terms of kinds of industry. Using “men” to identify working-class characters might also lead to ambiguities in this chapter, as it deals with issues of masculinity and what it means to be a man on a level other than employment and class.

²⁶ As Jennifer Foster points out, the “disclaimer is too modest” as Gaskell was familiar with the works of Harriet Martineau and other political economists (*Mary Barton* 30, note 2).

and unwillingness to work, to act, to do, on the part of male characters in the economic realm spills over into their domestic lives, where they are just as ineffective. On the other hand, female characters, who on account of their gender are not expected to be effective outside of the private, domestic sphere, are shown to rise to the occasion and act in heroic ways in the public sphere, in order to save the lives and freedoms of men.

Gaskell shows how women's ability to act when men cannot arises from the practice of immediate action in the realm of philanthropic work, as well as from a lack of pressure to be economically responsible. Thus, the ability to effectively perform personal, individual acts out of friendship and sympathy is shown to translate to the ability to perform acts of heroism, and to be essential to the well-being of individuals and communities. The help that working-class women give their neighbors and friends in *Mary Barton* is comparatively uncomplicated by notions of paternalism, obligation, or responsibility. While the mutual care and reciprocal help in times of distress among working-class characters evokes a sense of obligation within the community, it does not involve the same level of tension that occurs in the cases of interclass charity in *North and South*, where the sense of indebtedness is more powerful. In *North and South* philanthropy becomes an arena for the renegotiation of agency and power, as middle-class Margaret attempts to work through assumptions about charity, class, and friendship, and Gaskell queries the discrepancies between power and agency when it comes to class hierarchies in terms of women's effectiveness too. Middle-class Margaret's financial advantages make her work and direction both more complicated and more limited than working-class Mary's. Gaskell insists on the power of action, as opposed to idleness, and thus finds much to critique in an economic system that negotiates through *not doing*. Her critique comes in the form of the contrasting example of the forces of neighborly or charitable action, done immediately and effectively in the face of necessity. In ending both stories with what appears to be capitulation to traditional marriage situations, Gaskell suggests that the means of re-empowering men who are stagnating in political / economic inertia is to infuse their lives with the influence of women who are able to effect change, and able to conceive of relationships between owners and workers in terms other than economic. The hierarchy of gender is contested by the images of active women and passive men in the novels, as the hierarchy of class is contested by the insistence that owners and workers are equal as men. However, in order to establish the sense of sympathy and unity among men, Gaskell suggests that the distinct perspective of women – separate from economic anxieties and

ambitions – must be brought into play. Because of this, though the novels push to reconcile class differences, men and women necessarily remain in different spheres with different values and ways of viewing the world. The reconciliation of agency and power is achieved through marriages between men and women.

Since Kathleen Tillotson's inclusion of *Mary Barton* in her influential *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954), Gaskell's industrial novels have received serious critical attention. Tillotson's assessment that Gaskell's portrayal of working class characters is particularly praiseworthy, that they "are neither harrowing victims nor heroic martyrs; they are shown in their natural human dignity" (203) has been received with much agreement,²⁷ but critics find other flaws with the social messages of the novels. In 1958 Raymond Williams argues that the portrayal of working-class violence and the "humanitarian conclusion" signify Gaskell's regression to a conservative standpoint (90-92). John Lucas comes to a similar conclusion in 1967, suggesting that by making the question one of individual moral judgement through acts of violence, Gaskell "can simplify a complexity" (173) and retreat to a "position of superiority" (174). A more recent reading that suggests an underlying conservatism in Gaskell's industrial novels is Melissa Schaub's argument in 2004 that Gaskell uses sympathy "as a tool to discipline both the workers in her novels, and the workers who read her novels" (1). In 2007 Jill Matus also notices the contradictions inherent in *Mary Barton*, finding that Gaskell "pleads with... middle-class readers for a sympathetic response to turbulent working-class feelings, even as [she] also represents the working classes as lacking in control over their emotions" (27). In *North and South*, however, Matus finds "a (middle class) self that is less unified and governable than much mid-century psychological discourse would allow" (28), allowing her to suggest Gaskell's recognition of the sameness of human nature and of the potential for struggles to be "possibilities for growth" (28).

Gaskell's sympathetic portrayal of working-class characters, as well as her tendency to relocate political resolution in personal solutions, have been read as feminine aspects of her social stance. Feminist readings of the industrial novels have sought to re-evaluate notions that

²⁷ For example, Williams praises *Mary Barton* as "the most moving response in literature to the industrial suffering of the 1840s," noting the "intensity of the effort to record... the feel of everyday life in the working-class homes" (87). Lucas defends *North and South*, arguing that "as a study of an industrial worker, Nicholas Higgins is surely inferior only to John Barton" (190). In 1982 Joseph Kestner approves of "Gaskell's true knowledge of workingmen" (94), and as recently as 2007 the point is reaffirmed, as Julie Nash argues that Gaskell's "working-class characters are fully realized human beings with admirable strengths and serious flaws" (99).

condemn that feminine stance as conservative or regressive, as well as to consider depictions of gender relations in the two novels alongside of those of class. Patsy Stoneman argues in 1987 that Gaskell's answer to middle-class masculine aggression is to feminize male characters and endow them with maternal values. In 1994 Dorice Williams Elliot explores the role of the female charitable visitor in *North and South*, discovering that "it makes... important claims about her fitness for the role of mediator between classes; it also presses those claims against those of various male professionals" (25). In *The Feminine Political Novel* (1998), Barbara Harman argues that *North and South* is concerned with "legitimizing both female public action and female sexuality" (75), and in 2000 Pearl Brown reads both novels as about "the difficulties nineteenth-century women faced, regardless of class, attempting to negotiate the public sphere typically reserved for men" (345). Brown finds that in the seven years between the two novels "Gaskell sees women as having experienced a decline in the ability to control their destiny" (346). Most recently, in 2002, Laura Struve applies Harman's ideas to *Mary Barton* as well as to George Eliot's *Felix Holt*, finding that they "encourage readers to reject a sexual objectifying gaze and a restrictive ideology of separate spheres" (3). The two tacks that feminist readings take both suggest a challenge to the separation of spheres, either through the inclusion of men in the domestic or the export of women into the public. My argument instead suggests that Gaskell upholds the gendered separation, locating certain values and resolution in the domestic sphere that can influence and be of use in the public, but can only exist if the difference is maintained. Gaskell resolves the class conflicts that arise in the conventionally masculine sphere by appealing to the sympathetic ideals and corresponding agency fostered in the feminine.

In her 1852 polemic on the expected and enforced idleness of women, *Cassandra*, Florence Nightingale asks, "Why is it more ridiculous for a man than for a woman to do worsted work and drive out everyday in the carriage? Why should we laugh if we were to see a parcel of men sitting round a drawing-room table in the morning, and think it all right if they were women?" (32). Nightingale is interested in the plight of women, but as she queries what women are expected to do with their lives, she also points to the expectations that fall on the shoulders of men. The question of what defines a man in the Victorian era is vast and complicated by many matters, but one consistent answer is that to be manly is to work. It is the answer given in no uncertain terms by Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843), where he proclaims that "the mandate of God to His creature man is: Work!" (271-2). For Carlyle, masculinity is measured by

industry and productivity and especially by the desire to work. He envisions it not only as the means of attainment, but also as a weapon against weakness, claiming “Doubt, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like hell-dogs lie beleaguering the soul of ... every man: but he bends himself with free valour against his task, and all these are stilled, all these shrink murmuring far off into their caves. The man is now a man” (196). As Martin Danahay makes clear, “Carlyle is not using man... as a synonym for ‘human’ but rather for ‘male.’ Men have only one mission in life, and that is to work” (27). Indeed, here he becomes a man through embracing his work. In his pioneering study *Victorian Masculinities* (1995), Herbert Sussman also identifies work and production as essential to Victorian concepts of manhood, pointing out that “Bourgeois industrial manhood defines manliness as success within the male sphere, the new arena of commerce and technology in which sexual energy is transmuted into constructive labour” (4). In part, he sees the ideal of masculinity as hard work arising in reaction to perceived Romantic notions of male identity²⁸ – artistic and otherwise – as it insists “Masculine knowledge is not conferred in moments of revelation, but acquired through hours of hard work, not absorbed through wise passiveness, but achieved through strenuous activity” (118). Samuel Smiles’s influential conduct book for men, *Self-Help* (1859), translates patriotic feeling into the industry of every man, claiming that “National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice” (23), and that one “of the most strongly marked features of the English people is their spirit of industry... as strikingly characteristic of them now as at any former period” (48). As with Carlyle, however, Danahay cautions that Smiles’s rhetoric of work applies to men only, and even that “part of being a Victorian man seems to entail making sure you can never be mistaken for an idle woman” (31). While both Danahay and Sussman are anxious to point out that the construction of masculinity as hard work presented women as idle in contrast, they are equally as careful to note that Victorian women did in reality work as hard as did their male counterparts, although the kinds of work that they did was not always considered in the same terms.²⁹ Victorian masculine identity is tied not only to the ability but to the desire and will to work, in contrast with notions

²⁸In “Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine,” Alan Richardson argues for a more complicated understanding of Romantic masculinity, suggesting that a male appropriation of what previously had been and would again be considered feminine sensibility is a form of colonization or even “figurative cannibalism” by the male writer of the feminine experience (21).

²⁹ Specific discussions of women’s work and how it was valued are to be found in the introduction to this dissertation, pages 13-18, as well as page 39 and following of this chapter and in chapter two.

of feminine bodily weakness, inability, and passivity, so that to be active and successful in the work force is one of the key aspects of being a man, in a society where manhood was valued. The stoppage of work for both owners and workers in these two novels allows Gaskell to dissect this essential notion of masculinity.

Masculinity is shown to be at issue in Gaskell's industrial novels most overtly in the way the major male characters are unable to work, and then unable to act. For example, as *Mary Barton* draws to a close, Mary learns what various male characters in the novel have known for quite some time, that her Aunt Esther, whom she believed was a respectable housewife, is actually a drunk and a prostitute. Mary's response to the revelation is to "vehemently" exclaim "we must find her out, – we must hunt her up" and to rise "as if she was going out on the search then and there" (478). Her lover Jem, while "fondly restraining her," asks, "What could we do, darling?" to which Mary replies, "Do! Why! What could we *not* do, if we could but find her?" (478). This exchange epitomizes the difference between Mary and Jem in the book, as well as the differences between male and female characters in situations where help is required. While Mary is ready to run to her lost aunt's aid, Jem takes for granted that nothing can be done for Esther. Jem's defeatist attitude echoes that of virtually every significant male character in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, as they are unwilling or unable to act to make the changes that they desire, as well as very often unwilling to even try. This passiveness, or lack of agency, reflects the masculine political and economic situation, as the fact that men are expected to be able to act and effect change is partially what paralyses them and prevents them from doing so. The inability to effect change on the grander social, political, or economic scale affects a man's ability to do so on a personal scale, leading to significant domestic or personal problems. Feminist readings have noticed the emphasis placed on the feminized, nurturing aspect of the working-class male characters, which is juxtaposed with the lack of care shown by the middle-class men.³⁰ Working-class fathers in the two novels do attempt to substitute for mothers, for there is a shortage of mothers in general in Gaskell's writing. However, as substitutes, men are often ineffective.³¹ In

³⁰ Patsy Stoneman's influential reading, for example, posits that Gaskell portrays working-class fathers displaying feminized, maternal or nurturing traits in order to counterbalance middle-class masculine aggression. See also Lisa Surridge's article "Working-Class Masculinities in *Mary Barton*" which discusses the failures of middle-class versus the success of working-class fatherhood. Peter Gardner, on the other hand, notices the working-class father's abandonment of the family in order to devote himself to union issues (52-57).

³¹ In one example often cited as evidence of the nurturing nature of working-class men in the novel, Job Legh tells of caring for his infant orphaned granddaughter, and of how his in-law, Jennings, requests the nightcap of the chambermaid, who is able to calm and quiet the baby. Jennings and Legh are motivated to care for the baby, but

a world where women do work for a living, fatherhood and masculinity are no longer clearly defined by the economic power of the breadwinner. This aspect of working-class life Frederick Engels in 1844 describes as family “turned upside down” (182) and as a situation which “unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow upon the man true womanliness or the woman true manliness” (184). Gaskell’s depiction of men trying to be women, having lost the role of men, is similar to this concept, and expresses a similar anxiety about the loss of pure femininity or masculinity if the roles are blurred. When men stop working entirely, things are even worse. Men in the two novels fail as union organizers fighting for workers’ rights, and as capitalists fighting for their own interests. They also fail at home, as fathers, brothers, sons and lovers. The class war is shown to have a debilitating effect on the men that fight it, and the lack of progress or change in that sphere, for the men that care, translates into an inability to believe progress or change can be made in any sphere.

Gaskell connects the passivity and inactivity of specific male characters with the economic situation in which men, owners and workers, are supposed to act, but in which they cannot. In both novels, Gaskell uses the concept of the strike, where factories, machinery, owners, and workers, are idle, in order to highlight the stagnant state of communication between them, the lack of purposeful and effective action on either side, and the general dysfunction of capitalism. Gaskell describes the city of Milton at work in *North and South*:

The chimneys smoked, the ceaseless roar and mighty beat, and dizzying whirl of machinery, struggled and strove perpetually. Senseless and purposeless were wood and iron and steam in their endless labours; but the persistence of their monotonous work was rivaled in tireless endurance by the strong crowds who, with sense and with purpose, were busy and restless in seeking after – What? (379).

Leaving aside for the moment Gaskell’s question about the motivation behind all this bustle and toil, one notices the energy and activity which normally define Milton. Production is taking place; things are getting done. Mrs. Thornton, who lives next door to her son’s mill, claims that the sound of the factory “disturbs me no more than the humming of a hive of bees” (147).³² The

they are not immediately successful. Legh himself “laughed outright at th’ oud bearded chap thinking he’d make hisself like a woman just by putting on a woman’s cap” (152). They cannot comfort the baby and end up depending on the help of a female stranger to calm, feed, and change her the next day (154). Legh recalls that after all her wailing with her grandfathers, “the babby looked up so lovingly in her eyes, and made noises more like a dove than aught else” (154). Gaskell suggests that maternal feeling cannot be as easily taken up as a nightcap.

³² The image recalls George Cruikshanks’ popular illustration “The British Bee Hive” (1840).

image of the productive and pleasant hive is a positive one. At the point when she makes this comparison, though, she explains, “there are no sounds to come from the mill; the hands have been ungrateful enough to turn out” (147). In Milton, it is silence and clear skies that are ominous. When Margaret goes out into the smokeless streets once the strike has begun, she sees “unusual loiterers in the streets: men with their hands in their pockets sauntering along; loud-laughing and loud-spoken girls... apparently excited to high spirits and a boisterous independence of temper and behaviour” (121). This loitering, sauntering idleness among the working classes feels dangerous to Margaret, who cuts short her walk, and to the reader, who is led to see a buildup of excitement and energy with no outlet. Working-class Bessy Higgins, who is witnessing the third strike of her life, explains to Margaret that the feeling gets worse and more stagnant: “at times o’ strike there’s much to knock a man down, for they all start so hopefully; and where’s the comfort to come fro’?” (125). As well as turning to drink, Nicholas Higgins, according to his daughter, will “get angry and mad – they all do – and then they get tired out wi’ being angry and mad, and maybe ha’ done things in their passions they’d be glad to forget.... Yo’ dunnot know what a strike is yet” (125). To Bessy, a strike is a futile exercise in which she watches her father go from hopelessness to frustration, all the while sitting at home or at the gin shops, unable to do anything but wait.

Drinking and frustration in *North and South* replaces opium and starvation in *Mary Barton*, where the work-stoppage lasts longer and is even more detrimental to the lives and characters of the workers. John Barton follows the trajectory that Bessy Higgins sets out, beginning as an active and ambitious man who is “ready to do anything for his [Chartist] order” (57), but slips into discontent, hopelessness, and opium use as the Chartist petition to parliament is ignored and the strike goes on. Barton’s disappointment changes him. At one point to the extent that he beats his daughter,³³ and although that only happens once, he “often was angry” (165). The narrator, giving Mary’s view, declares “that was almost better than being silent. Then he sat near the fire-place (from habit), smoking, or chewing opium” (165). It is the stupor of doing nothing that is the worst part of the strike, and which mounts to the point where Barton, as

³³ Barton’s physical outburst is the result of his industrial inertia; he has no economic agency because he is not working, and no political agency because his petition has failed. All that he is left with is physical power, which accomplishes nothing. As in the letter that I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation (pg.1), Gaskell is concerned with the relationship between physical power or control and agency. In this case Barton’s physical outburst is entirely futile.

representative of other men in the same situation, turns to murder.³⁴ The initial reasoning behind the assassination of Harry Carson is not to raise awareness or even to frighten the owners into making a deal, but that the workers are tired of the situation and simply want to “have at the masters” (250), feeling that “It’s the masters as has wrought this woe; it’s the masters as should pay for it” (250). After having performed this act of revenge, John Barton becomes even less recognizable as the man he was, or as a man at all. The narrator describes him as spectral: “No haunting ghost could have had less of the energy of life in its involuntary motions than he” (428). He is reduced to an “automaton body” in which “all energy, both physical and mental, seemed to have retreated inward” (437). The strike has diminished Barton to a passive state, and the action that he finally takes out of the frustration that comes of being able to do nothing, reduces him to less than a man. Boucher’s desperate actions in *North and South* similarly lead to his downfall and death. Boucher is “an unskillful workman with a large family depending on him for support” (140), who demonstrates “a kind of despair that irritated Higgins, even as it went to his heart” (141). Bessy calls him “but a weak kind o’ chap,” but yet “a man for a’ that”³⁵ (142). Boucher, like John Barton, resorts to violence as his only means of relieving his frustration. The danger, though, begins with the idleness and stagnation that defines the work-stoppages in both books. Gaskell is very concerned with showing how this passive economic tactic is by its very nature ineffective and dangerous to the men who are left not doing, instead of working, thus allowing passions and energy to build up in ways that lead to outbursts of violence that are not intended or effective.

When it comes to the owners’ side of the issue, however, idleness and inaction are perhaps more reprehensible than the enforced – though of their own volition – idleness of the workers. Gaskell suggests that *not doing*, simply because one need not, is dangerous too, especially when it jeopardizes the lives of others. In *Mary Barton*, the “gentleman from London” who fires up the working-class crowd, distinguishes between “the employers and the employed, or (as he chose to term them) the idle and the industrious” (244). Though the narrator is careful to distance herself from the speaker’s choice of labels, the crowd appreciates and understands

³⁴ The drawing of straws to decide which man will be responsible for the deed makes even the act of murder somewhat passive on John Barton’s part. He is swept along by his anger and frustration, and then by the gathered group of men, and is finally chosen by fate to be the one to commit the murder. The violence is not committed in the passion of the moment, nor is it carefully calculated to make a point. Rather, it is carried out in a state of grim but weary revenge, as a thing that needs to be done.

³⁵ Bessy here echoes Robert Burns’s poem “Song: For a’ that and a’ that.”

them. Their impression, after all, is of the ease and the opulence of the lives the owners lead. John Barton believes that the money saved on mill-wages “will only go to keep servants and horses – to more dress and pomp” (248). Bessy Higgins imagines the “sumptuous feasts, and purple and fine linen” (*North and South* 137) of events like the Thorntons’ dinner, while noting that “th’ same money spent on potatoes and meal, would keep many a crying babby quiet, and hush up its mother’s heart for a bit!” (137). In appearance, at least in the eyes of the impoverished workers, the owners’ lives look golden. Gaskell argues that a simple way to dispel this image of the owners would be for them to communicate more effectively with the workers, which is eventually what happens between Thornton and Higgins in *North and South*, and in the conversation between Carson, Jem Wilson, and Job Legh in *Mary Barton*. The error on the owners’ part is when they refuse to talk to their workers, but also in their motives for holding back, for she accepts no excuse for stopped production as reasonable. John Barton “was not far wrong” (94) in his assumption that the Carsons are not too upset by the burning of their mill, for “trade was very slack,” and “cottons could find no markets” (94), so the fire is an excuse for stopping the “drain of wages given for labour” (95). While the Carsons plan to rebuild the factory, they are “in no hurry about the business” (95). In being willing to let their mills stand idle, the owners too are at fault. All of this, understandably from the owners’ point of view, is not communicated to the workers who are unemployed by the fire. In *North and South* there is a similar lack of communication from the owners. Mr. Thornton says of the impending strike that his workers “think trade is flourishing as it was last year.... because we don’t explain our reasons, they won’t believe we’re acting reasonably” (107). He then goes on to reveal the tricks other mill owners are pulling in order to dupe their workers into striking so that they will not have to pay them when prices are down, apparently oblivious to the fact that since such dishonesty exists, workers have very good reason to be made aware of the actual financial state of the mills they work for. Gaskell’s juxtaposition of honest Thornton’s indignation over being expected to account for his own money with the owners who are trying to cheat their workers by not disclosing, defeats his point. His proud and stubborn independence which makes him insist that “I will neither be forced to give my reasons, nor flinch from what I have declared to be my resolution,” though he “shall suffer as well as they” (111) is Thornton’s downfall.³⁶ His refusal to let his workers in on the state of the mill’s finances helps determine their decision to strike,

³⁶ The collection of owners in *Mary Barton* expresses similar sentiments (227, 240).

which ends up causing such financial setbacks for Thornton that the mill is unable to recover. In the economic war between mill owners and workers, a war which the religiously-minded Bessy compares to “the great battle o’ Armageddon, the way they keep on, grinning and fighting at each other” (138), both sides are mired and unwilling or unable to act, and, like their mills, stand idle. It is this economic stalemate that spreads into the other aspects of men’s lives and limits their ability to act in more personal and intimate situations as well.

One of the other ways that these men are affected is in the role of lover, which is played by Jem Wilson in *Mary Barton* and John Thornton in *North and South*, but which departs rather dramatically from the usual trajectory of male lover as hero. Jem and Thornton both end up playing the traditionally feminine role of passive love-object, leaving the active hero roles open to their female counterparts, Mary Barton and Margaret Hale. Jem begins *Mary Barton* as a promising hero, bold enough to steal a kiss from the irate Mary (42) and to risk life and limb to save his father and another man from the fire in Carsons’ mill. John Barton acknowledges this deed by swearing that “if Jem Wilson wanted Mary he should have her tomorrow” (92), suggesting the conventional romance resolution in which the brave young hero is rewarded with feminine love. Partially in reaction to her father’s preference for him, though, Mary refuses Jem’s proposal, after which his decisiveness of action disappears and he gets stuck in inaction and ineffectiveness. After his encounter with Esther, Jem’s “conscience smote him. He had not done enough to save her. One more effort, and she might have come. Nay, twenty efforts would have been well rewarded by her yielding” (219). Jem wants to save Esther, but is unable to do so. Though for “many and many a day afterwards he bitterly regretted his omission of duty; his weariness of well-doing” (219), Jem fails to help as needed. It is, however, not only in helping others that Jem is ineffective, for when he is wrongly charged with the murder of Harry Carson, he is unable to help himself. Part of the reason for this is Jem’s noble refusal to transfer the blame to the responsible culprit, John Barton. In fact, as Coral Lansbury points out, giving up Barton would not only be personally tragic, but “to do so would have meant implicating the union” (Lansbury 15), so Jem’s silence preserves class solidarity as well as family loyalty. Jem sees no alternative, however, and so gives up. He goes to court with “little or no expectation of an acquittal; and with scarcely any desire for life” (414). Lisa Surridge argues that Mary’s public confession in court of her love for Jem “vindicates Jem’s manliness” (340) as it shows that it is he, the working man, whom a beautiful woman chooses over the rich and handsome Harry

Carson. Mary's declaration is certainly used to indicate Jem's value to the crowd and to Jem himself, but it also places him in the position of object, as the shocked responses from the crowd attest to the unusual nature of Mary's confessions. As he sits in the courtroom, Jem is further objectified by the spectators' focus on the way that he looks (399), highlighted by the narrator's interjection, "Poor Jem! His raven hair (his mother's pride...), was that, too, to have its influence against him?" (399). The comment both condemns the fact that Jem is being judged by his physical appearance while at the same time pointing out his attractive "raven" hair, describing it as a source of pride, and reminding the reader that he is physically a worthy object of Mary's love. However, Jem is set in contrast in the courtroom and throughout the story with Harry Carson, who is an aggressively persistent lover³⁷ but a less attractive one. The situation that allows Mary's heroics necessarily takes away from Jem's, but in their marriage Gaskell suggests that the balance is reinstated, as Mary chooses to become Jem's wife rather than to continue in a more independent way of life. The traditionally feminine role that she takes on as his wife allows for the kind of feminine usefulness she has embodied to be perpetuated, and for her to continue to influence Jem in a positive way.

John Thornton, hero of *North and South*, though a very different character from Jem, undergoes a similar episode of demasculinization, where he is saved, twice in his case, by the unfeminine actions of a woman. The active, decisive role of the masculine lover is more complicated in the relationship between Margaret and Thornton, as he is less passive than Jem and more resistant to Margaret's interference and help, but also ultimately more thoroughly under her control. Ian Campbell suggests that "Gaskell makes frequent... use of the Carlylean notion of 'Captains of Industry,' hero figures who can lead an industrialized Britain... John Thornton is such a man" (243). As a self-made, hard working man who has risen to a position of industrial power and economic sway, he should be the epitome of Victorian manliness. Thus, it is all the more surprising when, as Catherine Stevenson argues, part-way through the novel Thornton takes on the typical female heroine's romantic trajectory: "The male rags-to-riches story, in which character is assumed to be destiny, is intersected by a plot of physical vulnerability, emotional awakening and turmoil, financial dependence, uncertainty, and finally

³⁷ While Jem, after a brief temper tantrum, chooses "the certainty of despair" (180) and leaves before Mary can change her mind, Carson, when refused in much less uncertain terms, insists "I do not mean to give her up" (189) and continues to pursue Mary. He becomes her "persecuting lover" whose "wonderful perseverance" and the "unmanly force which he [uses] to detain her to listen to him" makes him "almost hateful" (209).

marriage” (14). Stevenson shows that this plot begins during the riot scene, when Margaret steps in front of Thornton to protect him physically from harm. After Margaret rushes out, Thornton moves “away from behind her, as if jealous of anything that should come between him and danger” (162) although, before Margaret urges him to “go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man” (161), he is perfectly willing to keep barred doors and locked windows between him and danger. As she shields Thornton with her body, Margaret is struck, and when Thornton accuses the crowd of cowardice in harming a woman, he is answered with accusations of his own cowardice: “Th’ stone were meant for thee, but thou wert sheltered behind a woman!” (163). It is because his bravery is at stake that Thornton faces the mob in the first place, but he ends up further feminized when Margaret steps in to save him. Unlike Jem, who views Mary’s actions in the court to save him as proof of her love and entirely positive, Thornton is challenged by Margaret’s actions. However, without her interference he does not act. Thornton’s reaction to Margaret’s rejection of his love is “positive bodily pain, – a violent headache, and a throbbing, intermittent pulse” (191). Not beaten yet, though, he determines on a course of action of stubborn, yet inactive, persistence – not to bother her again with his suit, but to “not change one whit” and to “love her; and defy her, and this miserable bodily pain” (191). It is a proud, stubborn, masculine resolution – to do nothing.³⁸

Before Thornton’s masculinity is called into question by the riot scene, he and Margaret hold a significant discussion of what it means to be a man. In distinguishing his concept of a “true man” from what Margaret calls a “gentleman,” Thornton says “‘gentleman’ is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as ‘a man,’ we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself, – to life – to time – to eternity” (150). For Thornton, manliness is about abstract conceptions of identity. By the end of the novel, however, Thornton as a man is defined precisely by his interpersonal relationships. Higgins describes him as “two chaps,” saying, “he comes here pretty often; that’s how I know the chap that’s a man, not a measter” (308). When Thornton considers his career in light of his immanent financial failure, he recalls his former idea of success which was “to

³⁸ The next event in the book shows how Thornton is beginning to change from the decisive (if stubborn and wrong-headed) man that he was. As he stands “still for a moment, to make this resolution firm and clear” a bus stops for him. Because “it was too much trouble to apologize and explain” (191), Thornton instead simply gets on the bus and is “borne away” (191). When the bus reaches its destination in the countryside, “everybody got down; and so did Mr. Thornton, and because they walked away he did so too” (192). Thornton’s passivity here, as he simply floats along with no notion of where he is going, is remarkable. There is no particular plot-driven reason to include this short scene either; however, it is important as a marker of Thornton’s surrender of his volition, at least temporarily.

possess the influence of a name in foreign countries and far-away seas – to become the head of a firm that should be known for generations” (380). These goals have evolved so that Thornton feels “the apprehension of losing the connection” (380) with his men much more than anything else. He now wants to live up to his former definition of gentleman, not man. Thornton’s evolving definition of what it means to be a man allows for manliness to be involved in the personal. He approaches Margaret with the news that he has received a petition from his workers “stating their wish to work for me, if ever I was in a position to employ men again on my own behalf,” and humbly finishes by asking her, “That was good, wasn’t it?” (392). This new attitude, which embraces the values that Margaret has been pressing all along, hence his application for her approbation, is what allows the man who was enraged by Margaret’s physical interference during the riot, to let her save him again at the end, this time with her financial interference. In fact, the monetary “proposal” that she puts forward, being “most anxious to have it all looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement” (394), he interprets as a proposal of marriage, which he, like any heroine rescued at the last minute by a match with a rich and attractive suitor, accepts. By the end of the story Thornton is converted to the relational definition of manliness, has thrown off all his stubborn insistence on his own independence and pride, and is willingly sheltered by a woman. Gaskell does not suggest that his capitulation is a negative thing; rather, that the union with Margaret and her capabilities will establish Thornton’s efficacy and make him a better captain of industry.

As a group, whether they be owners or workers, the primary male characters in these two novels prove to lack agency, no-matter the goodness of their motives or the strength of their desire for change. The fact that they are expected to be the ones to do something makes them all the less able. Gaskell is careful to show how work and idleness on an industrial, economic level play out on a personal, familial, community or social level. The inability of male characters to act effectively as fathers and as owners and workers is a negative thing, causing harm, disorder, violence, and stress in families, and violence, frustration, and dangerous despair in society. When it come to the romantic plots of the two novels, however, the passive and indecisive and thus malleable man turns out to be a more positive thing. In *Mary Barton* Jem Wilson’s passivity is contrasted with Harry Carson’s frightening aggression. In *North and South* Gaskell shows a man with a stubborn will to not act, unmanned by the actions and influence of a woman so that he comes to think and act as she does, empowered to do so by her money. Because these men, like

the rest of their gender, are stuck in the passive or stagnant roles the economic situation forces them into, they need the influence of active women to help them become productive and useful. In contrast throughout both books with the passivity and ineffectiveness of the men is the consummate energy, activity, and agency of the main female characters, who act immediately and effectively to help themselves and others, and in doing so to begin to effect the changes that the issues described in the novels call for. However, it is because they do not face the same pressures and responsibilities within the industrial realm of masculine work that women are paradoxically able to present effective answers.

Women's work and their role in the workforce were different from but had a direct bearing on men's,³⁹ and one way in which women began to find a space outside of their own homes was through charitable or philanthropic work, still performing traditional feminine functions, but for ends other than absolute devotion to their families. In her industrial novels, Gaskell uses female philanthropy as a place from which agency springs, and from which both women's and men's lives can be changed for the better. Women as visitors to the poor in the nineteenth-century was a fraught issue, and is still contentious now, as critics attempt to discover the kinds of freedoms or restrictions the role carried with it. Martha Vicinus notes the popularity of charity work for Victorian ladies, but dismisses its outcome, suggesting that it had such a limited influence that women were "positively prevented from effecting real change" (xi). Elizabeth Langland argues that female visiting was a means of middle-class social control and moral management of the working class (56-7). Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall opt for a

³⁹ As the number of unmarried and thus unsupported women began to grow in England, reaching approximately half a million by mid era, so too did the debate around fit work for them. This plethora of old maids flooding the market became a popular topic for essayists debating the merits or drawbacks of whether women should expect and be allowed equal opportunities with men in the public workforce, or if their place was always to be defined by the fact that their gender supposedly rendered them fit only to perform domestic duties because it brought the issue to a crux. The conservative response insisted that in no situation should women be encouraged to take action and work for themselves, because either they were naturally unable to perform the work of men, or because they were needed instead in the home. W.R. Greg, conservative essayist and friend of the Gaskells, makes the typical claim that the "brain and frame of woman are formed with admirable suitability to their appropriate work, for which subtlety and sensitiveness, not strength and tenacity of fibre, are required" (447-8). Women were perceived by many as incapable of doing certain tasks, and as incapable of a higher level of physical and mental exertion. Worse, as Eliza Lynn Linton argues in 1870, women who think, as more and more were beginning to, that they need not be restricted to the home sacrifice those ideals that the Victorian woman should embody, "having neither the sweetness, the tenderness, the modesty of the one sex, nor the courage, the resolution, the power of the other" ("Modern Revolt" 151). Linton's worry is that the path modern women are on will lead to "uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, and horror of all useful work" ("Girl" 148). Women who wanted work outside of the home, for Linton and the many that agreed with her, were aliens in both the masculine workforce, where they could not adequately perform, and at home, where they had become ruined for proper feminine feeling and behavior.

more moderate view of the effects of female philanthropy, suggesting that women “may not have been exerting real social power and engineering major social change... but nor were they simply taking as given the boundaries of female social action” (436). Anne Summers, on the other hand, presents women’s involvement as putting “significant political and social pressure on the direction and administration of official policies towards the poor” (33). She views the effects of philanthropic work as ambiguous, on the one hand allowing women some power outside of their own homes, but on the other, in its emphasis on moral influence and domestic pride, confirming middle-class women in traditional feminine roles and influencing working-class women to adhere to those patriarchal ideals as well (43-59). Thus she concludes that the work of Victorian philanthropic women was “both progressive and reactionary” (60). F.K. Prochaska’s book-length study takes the most optimistic stance, as he argues that “if we are to isolate one profession that did more than any other to enlarge the horizon of women in nineteenth-century England, it would have to be the profession of charity” (222). Prochaska also allows that in many ways the help that middle-class women offered was not free from expectations and a sense of paternalism that we are uncomfortable with today, yet he does suggest that the motive of fear of working-class revolt or agitation “can be overstated” (102), and that most of the philanthropic feeling was genuine. The general sense is that middle-class female charity did at least as much to increase power and awareness for middle-class women themselves, leading to significant legal changes such as the Married Women’s Property Acts and eventually women’s suffrage, as it did to ameliorate the conditions of the poor.

Recently several critics have emphasized the important role of female philanthropy in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* specifically, and the role that it might play in moving from the private or domestic realm of the home onto a more public or political one. Elliot argues for the “crucial role of the female visitor” (24) in what she sees as “the newly defined social sphere, a space that is both private and public” (25). Pamela Parker finds that “Gaskell’s novels elevate the significant social, political, and domestic work accomplished by female philanthropy even as they evaluate the limitations of this work to solve the larger problems of the poor” (325). Pearl Brown, however, finds *North and South* represents a decline in the condition of women when compared with *Mary Barton*, because of the limits of the domestic sphere. She notices specifically that while “charity work at mid-century was an avenue upper-class women could pursue to give their lives some sense of purpose” (348), Gaskell suggests “how little autonomy”

Margaret has, so that despite her claims she is not depicted “actively pursuing social work but rather existing passively in a state of suspension until her legacy comes through” (349).

Women’s philanthropic activity is thus seen as both a means to transcend the separation of spheres, a way to gain power on a public level through the kind of domestic work that women were expected to do, but also as limited and problematic because of its ties with the domestic and traditional. It is my contention that Gaskell uses the experience of charitable work as a feminine example for men’s work in these novels, and as an impetus for the active agency of the two heroines. As the male characters’ lack of work becomes emasculating, this particular kind of women’s work becomes not only a means of empowerment for individuals, but a step towards reconciliation of social classes.

Nineteenth-century thought on female visitors and philanthropists⁴⁰ was as much concerned with the effects on the visitors themselves, and their families, as with the effects on the beneficiaries. Of course, opinion was divided. People recognized that sympathy and philanthropic feeling, as well as moral influence and domestic prowess, were precisely the traits that women were expected to possess, and which the poor and infirm were supposed to need. In her best-selling treatise, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, originally published in 1799,⁴¹ Hannah More suggests that girls be taught “to set apart a fixed portion of their time, as sacred to the poor” (332). For More, women are “particularly fitted” for this service, for “from their own habits of life they are more intimately acquainted with domestic wants than the other sex... they should be expected to have more sympathy; and they have obviously more leisure” (332). At the same time there were worries about threats to women’s safety and morality, and that to remove a woman from her own particular domestic sphere would be to diminish the care and comfort her own family received. Fears about the power that might result from thus widening women’s sphere and the slippery slope to further emancipation underlie these arguments. Elizabeth Sanford, in 1831, agrees in principle with the importance of

⁴⁰ The philanthropic lady was a figure of ridicule and caricature in much Victorian fiction as well. The socially active but domestically derelict Mrs. Jellyby in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), Charlotte Yonge’s ambitious social reforming heroine Rachel Curtis in *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), and Wilkie Collins’s hypocritical evangelical Miss Clack in *The Moonstone* (1868) are all examples of this type of interfering woman who inevitably does more harm than good in her efforts.

⁴¹ Though the book was originally published eleven years before Gaskell was born, it was tremendously popular and went through thirteen editions by 1826, selling over nineteen-thousand copies (Driscoll). Though More was not a Unitarian, her influence was very likely felt in Gaskell’s own upbringing, as she was partially educated at an Anglican school.

female charitable action, but she has concerns about how it is carried out. She feels that some philanthropic duties threaten women's modesty and decorum, suggesting that if women "must take the lead at female committees, or preside at tables or bazaars, they should do so with the least possible display" (58). Sanford feels more comfortable with charitable societies that are under the direction and control of men, where women

would, indeed, not be made the chief agitators; they would not be appointed the most laborious or the most responsible offices; they would not be sent into districts where it is scarcely fit for modest women to appear; – but they would be directed in all cases of difficulty; and, instead of rambling about on a philanthropic crusade, they would have an assigned sphere of usefulness and a proper and subordinate duty. (59)

She goes on to further caution that married women, to whose "duties at home all other social duties should be subordinate" (59), likely do not have the time for active philanthropic work. Sanford's appraisal of the proper role of woman, then, at best situates her as man's helper, but is more interested in putting her back in her husband's house, safely performing her own domestic duties. Anna Jameson⁴² takes up the other side of the issue in her lectures on the "Sisters of Charity" (1855), and "The Communion of Labour" (1856), in which she strongly advocates for female involvement not only in personal visiting and in philanthropic societies, but in the management of institutions and in the nursing field. She considers charitable work for women "a sphere of healthy action" ("Sisters" 13) and that women's domestic expertise should be made use of on a wider plane: "[woman] begins by being the nurse, the teacher, the cherisher of her home, through her greater tenderness and purer moral sentiments; then she uses these qualities and sympathies on a larger scale, to cherish and purify society" (29). Jameson advocates training for women about to employ themselves in the realms of charitable work, but also that work done without pay "has a potency for good that no hired service can have" ("Communion" 276). She thus attempts to balance the value of woman's innate feelings with the regulation and professionalization of the work that they do, carefully keeping the feelings in the forefront.⁴³ The

⁴² Jameson and Gaskell knew each other and travelled in the same intellectual circles. While they were not particularly close friends, Jameson's support of her writing, particularly the controversial *Ruth*, was valued by Gaskell (Uglow 219-220).

⁴³ John Stuart Mill, however, in his essay on "The Subjection of Women" (1869) finds that though "the influence of women is valuable in the encouragement it gives to these [philanthropic] feelings in general, in the particular applications the direction it gives to them is at least as often mischievous as useful" (387). Mill is making a point about the education of women, "of the sentiments rather than of the understanding" (388), which he believes makes them aware only of "immediate effects on persons, and not remote effects on classes of persons" (388) which blinds

idea that there is some purity about work done for the sake only of goodness, not marred by compensation⁴⁴ or even recognition is an essential one for Gaskell, as she considers the limits as well as the advantages of possessing money or status.

The anonymous author of an article in *The Edinburgh Review* in January 1856, which reviews “Lectures to Ladies on Practical Subjects,” like Jameson, feels that female philanthropists need to be somewhat better educated in the work that they do, and cites *North and South* as an ideal. The article praises men who are teaching them, who “do honour to women (*sic*) by giving her the benefit of the best thoughts of manly minds” (152). Like Sanford, the author warns that woman must not “desert the family life in order to exercise her benevolent propensities” (149), threatening that “seldom would the energies of such a life be productive of more than a dwarfed and mutilated virtue” (149). The author also worries about the possible consequences of too regulated a system, feeling that it encourages the poor to “come to regard themselves as the inspected and the lady as the inspector” (150) and to make themselves appear to need more help than they actually do. This danger is to the visitor’s well-being as well, for her “heart may well ache, under the apprehension that she has been instrumental in lowering the moral courage of those she wished to serve” (151). The author prefers a more spontaneous system, advocating for a kind of friendship among the visitors and visited that requires the “Humility and deep sympathy” (151) of the visitor. As an example of how this works effectively the author presents the relationship that grows between Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins in *North and South*. This relationship does not develop in the novel easily, as Gaskell is careful to show that Margaret’s middle-class assumptions need to be checked before she can be truly effective, and that differences in power that follow from differences in class are obstacles to agency in these situations.

Gaskell’s correspondence reveals that her own experience of charitable work was one where she found her own middle-class position of power to be somewhat limited and limiting. As the wife of a minister, and particularly as one located in the industrial, working-class hub that

them to the “evil tendency” of “unenlightened and shortsighted benevolence” (388). Mill’s argument is that women, who are themselves raised to be dependent and do not know otherwise, do not recognize that much charity “saps the very foundation of the self-respect, self-help, and self-control which are the essential conditions of both individual prosperity and of social virtue” (388). Mill’s list of positive attributes sounds very much like Carlyle or Smiles. He goes on to clarify, though, that women, “where they actually have the practical management of schemes of beneficence” (388) are very good at responsible charity; it is those who just give money who are problematic.

⁴⁴ This sentiment reflects Gaskell’s middle-class status as a person who could financially afford to act entirely out of philanthropic feeling, without regard to reward.

was Victorian Manchester, Gaskell was personally involved in working with the poor. In a letter of 1852 she insists that practical, hands-on involvement “may benefit any person in a far more wholesome and durable way than by lazy handing over the money they don’t want” (*Letters* 192). She goes “off on a rhapsody” about the “numbers of people who steadily refuse Mr. Gaskell’s entreaties that they will give their time to anything, but will give him or me tens & hundreds that don’t do half the good that individual intercourse, & earnest conscientious thought for others would do!” (193). Clearly, Gaskell advocated the investment of personal time, energy, and friendship, because she felt that charitable action was relational and reciprocal, and the giver could benefit from the action as much as the beneficiary. During the winter of 1862 Manchester underwent the particularly hard times of the cotton famine⁴⁵ and Gaskell’s and her daughters’ ideas about charity and visiting, as well as their sympathies and energies, were put to the test. Gaskell writes the following summer that she is concerned for her daughter Meta’s “being weighed down into care by the pressure of the sorrow around her” (706-7). She believes that “tho’ we all gave our lives to ‘the Distress’⁴⁶... Marianne did not think so deeply about it all as Meta, – nothing like it. She decided quicker in individual cases; and shook them off quicker, – out of her mind I mean, – but Meta labored day and night in weighing and planning and thinking” (707). The work takes an emotional as well as a physical toll, and Gaskell feels that Marianne’s way of interacting, which is more about immediate actions than about deep connections or even sympathy, is just as effective to the helped and less damaging to the helper. A later letter to Charles Eliot Norton,⁴⁷ dated February 1856, reveals that Meta, under Doctor’s orders, “is *not* to visit the poor” and “*not* to be worried” (745), her investment having proved too taxing for her. Gaskell recognizes that as well as the potential danger to the visitor, charity is not always effective in the lives of the people it is meant to help. She admits to Norton “what a nightmare last winter was – and at last we seemed to have done more harm than good – not ‘we’

⁴⁵ The Cotton Famine was a period of commercial hardship for the cotton manufacturing industry in Lancashire during the early 1860. A combination of a shortage of raw cotton from the southern United States due to the American civil war, an already saturated market, and over-extended mills contributed to the crisis (Henderson 7-34). Because much of the economy depended on the prosperity of the cotton mills it was a period of widespread poverty.

⁴⁶ Gaskell explains that it “was *such* hard work – we were often off at nine, – not to come home till 7, or ½ past, too worn out to eat or do anything but go to bed” (*Letters* 707).

⁴⁷ Norton was an American political theorist with an interest in the prevention of poverty in the United States. He and Gaskell met in Manchester in 185, became good friends, and corresponded regularly afterwards, on both political and personal themes. Norton was an advocate of affordable, safe, and sanitary housing for the poor through municipal funding (Vanderbilt 38-44) and believed that if the rich did not extend help to the poor, conditions would worsen for everyone. He wrote in 1851 “Benevolence is dictated by the most refined selfishness, as well as by virtue” (qtd. in Vanderbilt 38).

alone – perhaps ‘we’ less than most; but the imposition, the deterioration in character &c. &c. were so great.... I should so have liked to consult you about what *really does good* among the poor” (707).⁴⁸ Expressing her discouragement over her own lack of agency, Gaskell’s perspective is a middle-class one, somewhat paternalistic and concerned with responsibility for the effects of the help she offers. The anxiety over knowing what is best, as well as the disappointed sense of having failed or having been taken advantage of, is a block or limit to the charitable spirit, one that prevents Meta from continuing. This perspective and experience is reflected in Margaret Hale’s attempts at philanthropy in *North and South*. The middle-class power to dictate how, when, and what charity will be given is in its own way a burden. Working-class charity as Gaskell presents it in *Mary Barton* is much simpler and more idealized, as friends do what they can to help, without options, or thought to responsibilities or consequences.

While Gaskell does not overtly connect her thoughts and comments about her experiences with philanthropic work with ideas of gender, there are connections to be considered. Meta’s breakdown is in its way a proof of female sensitivities as unable to handle the stresses of charity work. Marianne’s decisive, more immediate approach and subsequent ability to not dwell on the issues proves the opposite. In an earlier letter (1859), Gaskell praises Meta, saying she “is turning out such a noble beautiful character” (536) because she “teaches patiently at the Ragged school, – and has poor old people whom she goes to see regularly, as a friend not as a benefactor” (537). This is perhaps the pinnacle of effective philanthropy for Gaskell. The ideal is a reciprocally beneficial relationship where help – physical, monetary, or emotional support – can immediately and effectively be given, without judgment, but also without deceit or abuse. This is what makes the enterprise a pleasure as well as a duty. Gaskell sees that this ideal is not always the reality, but she is motivated to make it as much so as possible. In *Mary Barton* charitable work is framed in terms of friendship, and help among friends is shown to be essential to effective communities. So it is in *North and South* as well, but only after Margaret learns to overcome paternalistic biases and to give up notions of power to replace them with agency. Because it is friendship, it is performed on an individual rather than an institutional basis. Because it involves a naturalization of qualities such as caring, sympathy, and self-sacrifice as feminine, it is problematic for modern feminists. However, the way in which philanthropy is put

⁴⁸ Gaskell’s experience here confirms the worry of the author of “Lectures to Ladies,” about the “heartache” that perceived abuse might cause.

into action by female characters in both books shows not only the immense emotional and physical capability that Gaskell attributes to individual women, but that the ethic of selfless and practical action learned in doing for others can be called upon in doing for oneself.

In *Mary Barton*, philanthropic work takes place amongst the working classes as neighbors help each other to weather hardships and poverty in the name of friendship, uncomplicated by notions of responsibility, as Mary is taught to act effectively. This help comes without strings and without imposing limits on the giver. Mary must learn to help over the course of the story, from the example of other selfless, giving women, as well as by seeing the positive consequences and the good that is done. Mary's growth from materialistic girl to selfless woman has been seen in different ways by different readers. Stoneman reads it as an ideological struggle between "the ethic of caring and cooperation" and "the commodity market" (51), but Lansbury interprets even Mary's ambitions on the marriage market as positive, suggesting she "has learned that price of everything around her and knows how to bargain on her own behalf" (21). The progress that Mary makes is based on her coming to terms with the value of relationships and people instead of the things that would come with being rich Harry Carson's wife. Especially, Mary learns the value of work. Alice Wilson begins Mary's education by her own selfless and busy example and with stories of her past. She tells Mary how she was never able to return to her home in the country after going into service because her mistress depended on her help: "You see, they kept a little shop, and he drank, and missis and me was all there was to mind children and shop and all, and cook and wash besides" (65). Along with providing another example of a man who is a detriment rather than a contributor to a situation, the tale inspires Mary's comment that she is happy to have escaped a life of service. Alice's reply, "Eh, Lass! thou little knows the pleasure o' helping others" (65), is prophetic, as Mary and the reader learn the pleasure, necessity, and duty of helping others that Alice has embodied over her lifetime.

The first act of pure and effective selflessness on Mary's part takes place in the event of Ben Davenport's death. The episode is important for several reasons. It is the strongest and final instance of John Barton's active sympathy as he and George Wilson gather money and food for the starving family and try to seek medical help for the dying man. It also allows the reader a glimpse into the unfeeling and thoughtless charity practiced by Mr. Carson and his son. Carson carelessly informs Wilson that he does not have the emergency infirmary order "to spare at present" (109), but gives him one "to be presented the following Monday" (109). The narrative

interjection – “Monday! How many days there were before Monday!” (109) – indicates how ineffective both the order and Carson’s assistance in the matter are. As Wilson departs, Harry Carson gives “five shillings out of his pocket” to him, “for the poor fellow” (110). His nonchalant manner of making his donation contrasts sharply with the five shillings Barton has already contributed to the cause, which he got having “strode, ran, and hurried home” (98) to collect his best things to pawn. Carson has the power to help, perhaps even to save Davenport’s life, but not the will or the agency. While what Barton does is not enough to save Davenport, in making him and his family comfortable he does much more than Carson. Once Ben Davenport is dead, John Barton turns to Mary and asks her to “Try if thou canst comfort yon poor, poor woman” (111) who “lay hidden in the [bed]clothes, in a stupor of agony” (111). Mary “did not know what to say, or how to comfort” (111), but she embraces Mrs. Davenport and is soon “crying herself so bitterly that the source of tears was opened by sympathy in the widow, and her full heart was, for a time, relieved” (111). Along with her tearful sympathy, Mary gives Mrs. Davenport the practical comfort of knowing she will not be left alone. She exhorts her to her own duty too, saying “I know how lonesome you must feel; but think of your children. Oh! We’ll all help to earn food for ‘em. Think how sorry he’d be, if he sees you fretting so” (111). Mrs. Davenport’s ultimate comfort is to come through thinking of others. Mary then goes home to sew a mourning costume out of her own old gown: “She set to work at once, and was so busy and so glad over her task, that she had, every now and then, to check herself in singing merry ditties” (112). The dress is for Mrs. Davenport, “a satisfaction to her poor heart in the midst of her sorrows” (112), and for Mary a way in which she can direct her energy and desire to help. Her gladness in doing this is proof that Mary has learned Alice’s lesson about the pleasure to be derived from helping others. Unlike Gaskell’s experience of wondering what best to do, for Mary the answer is obvious – she does all she can, immediately and without meditation. Her unadulterated joy is evidence that her mind is free from anxieties about the consequences. This is an idealistic simplification on Gaskell’s part, but also a recognition that power and paternalism are limiting, even in philanthropy. What is done for Mrs. Davenport is effective, too, as afterwards she “determined” to move from the unsanitary cellar, takes in childcare and sewing, and is apparently better off after her husband’s death than when she depended on him. In her turn, Mrs. Davenport makes John Barton a fashionable new collar for his trip to London (130), she is there to help Jane Wilson after Jem has been arrested (338, 342), and she is “ever ready”

(345) to stay with the dying Alice. Thus Mary's unhesitating and wholehearted comfort, sympathy, and practical assistance prove effective, and Mrs. Davenport comes out an active and effective caregiver herself; a far cry from the stupor she began in. The spirit of selfless exertion, motivated by the need of others, sympathy for their plight and pleasure in the very act of helping are the values instilled in Mary⁴⁹ that she carries into the public realm of her journey to save Jem, and that make her a heroine by the end of the book.

While this spirit of actively doing good takes place among women of the same social class in *Mary Barton*, in *North and South* it crosses class barriers, as Margaret learns how to be effectively sympathetic and philanthropic from her position as a member of the middle class. Margaret's situation, like Gaskell's own, is one from which she feels the responsibility of charity. Unlike the idealized philanthropy in *Mary Barton*, Margaret's trials are ones Gaskell had more personal knowledge of, and ones that she subjects to more dissection. The limits to Margaret's agency and the ways in which she overcomes them are thus particularly significant. While Mary has to learn to appreciate the power of work, Margaret has to learn to offer friendship instead of simply charity. Unlike Mary, Margaret is not surrounded by useful or effective examples of women. Rather, the women in Margaret's life, with the exception of the servant Dixon, are either incapacitated by sickness, like her mother, or by the luxurious circumstances of their very lifestyles, like her London relations, who are rich enough to do nothing. Instead of learning from examples, then, Margaret learns from mistakes. Campbell suggests that the element of spontaneity in Margaret's relationship with the Higginses is what defeats "strained social diplomacy" (240) and requires Margaret "to respond as a human being rather than as a member of a different social class" (241). However, she moves to Milton with certain ideas about her role as a former minister's daughter within a community mostly poorer than herself, and though she attempts social diplomacy, the genuine relationship only arises from rejection. When she meets the Higginses she makes her first error, in thinking it would be "an understood thing... that she intended to come and call upon any poor neighbour" (68). When

⁴⁹ As the book progresses, Mary's sympathy and philanthropic activity are more ready and more immediately active. She experiences a brief lapse as she is focused on her own despair that Jem may be a murderer, and she "impatiently" answers a child beggar, "Oh, lad, hunger is nothing – nothing!" (296). However, Mary's "heart upbraided her the next minute" (296) and she brings the last of the food from her own cupboard back to the boy, to be "diverted from the thought of her own grief by the sight of his infantine gladness" (297). As the story draws to a close, Mary's eagerness to help Esther, who has not been helped by John Barton or by Jem though they both had the opportunity, is the culmination of her devotion to performing good and helpful actions for those that need them.

Higgins wants to know why, she feels that her “kindly interest in a stranger” begins “all at once to take the shape of an impertinence on her part” (68). Higgins then extends his own charity, figuring that since she is new to the city and is looking to make friends she should come if she wants, and Margaret, “half-amused, half-nettled at this answer” is “not sure if she would go where permission was given so like a favour conferred” (68). Margaret’s original motivation in offering to visit, which she has trouble articulating, is revealed by this last thought, for her assumption is that her presence should be considered the favor. When she encounters Bessy in the street again, not having paid the promised visit, she realizes that what Bessy wants is a friend. Though Bessy is initially upset with Margaret for not coming, she decides, “I ha’ none so many to care for me; if yo’ care yo’ may come” (83). Margaret is forgiven her forgotten, or ignored, promise, but on the condition that she begin to “care,” which is what she does. During that first visit Margaret tries to make the coughing Bessy more physically comfortable, holding her in her arms with her head on her breast in a gesture of intimacy evocative of sisterhood. In giving her time and her physical comfort instead of her patronage or her money, Margaret becomes Bessy’s friend.

Like Mary Barton, Margaret is also involved in a scene surrounding the death of a working-class man and the comforting of his grieving widow, as it falls to Margaret to break the news to Mrs. Boucher of her husband’s death. It is a “dree task” (269), but since both Higgins and her father refuse it, Margaret takes it on. Both Higgins and Hale have some responsibility to Mrs. Boucher. Higgins argued with her husband before he died, and Mr. Hale failed to understand the seriousness of the Bouchers’ situation. At Margaret’s behest he goes to see the Bouchers, but seeing them enjoying the abundance of food just sent by his wife, he brings back a “consoling and cheerful account” and “described all as better than it really was” (145). Hale’s mistaken impression here shows the potential ineffectiveness of middle-class charity, both in his wife’s simply sending food and his own lack of perception of the reality behind the situation. Margaret succeeds in breaking the tragic news, which Mrs. Boucher grasps by “understanding the meaning of that tearful look” (270) on Margaret’s face as she makes an emotional connection. However, Margaret’s help is not needed to comfort the widow, as another woman “evidently a stranger to the house, a new-comer to the district, indeed” (271) enters and is “so kind and thoughtful that Margaret felt she was no-longer needed” (271). This working-class woman gently suggests that Margaret and her father, who is attempting to comfort Mrs. Boucher

with religion, go, saying “if yo’ come tomorrow, yo’ can have a deal o’ wise talk with her, that she’s not up to to-day” (273). Educated and moneyed middle-class help is rejected for the competence of working-class friendship, even from a stranger, who knows what is appropriate and wanted. Margaret’s charity and friendship in Milton suggest Gaskell’s awareness of the difficulty of doing away with different assumptions and expectations of different classes, and that charity is ineffective compared to friendship, which, though ideal, is hard to grow.

Though it is imperfect, Margaret’s experience in Milton causes her to resolve to be as useful and effective as possible with her time, and, once she inherits it, her money. In London, Margaret discovers that there is “a strange, unsatisfied vacuum in [her] heart and mode of life” (339) which her cousin Edith, typically, attributes to a lack of social interaction. She laughs off Margaret’s crisis by saying “No wonder it is moped, poor darling!” (339), thus creating deeper sympathy for Margaret’s situation, where she, “it,” gets spoken to in the same manner as a lap dog might, and is perhaps as useless. Margaret is “moped,” and “wearied with the inactivity” (340) of her days in London, as well as with the attitudes of London society, in whose conversation she finds “every talent, every feeling, every acquirement, nay, every tendency towards virtue, was used up as materials for fireworks...exhausted... in sparkle and crackle” (370). Once she gets a chance to meditate on her new lifestyle, Margaret understands that “she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it” (377). Margaret must consider “that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working” (377). The way that the two ideas are set at odds is especially interesting, for work is clearly liberating, while obedience involves some loss of self in the merging. Margaret decides against much merging at all, although she gets her way by using very feminine means: “She *charmed* her aunt into acquiescence with her will” (378, emphasis mine). The duties that Margaret fights for the right to perform are not described in detail. Brown, in fact, argues that Margaret “is strangely silent on the direction her life might take” (349), and that her silence suggests that she is not doing anything. But, Edith is “always expecting to hear of her having met with something horrible among all those wretched places she pokes herself into” (387) and worries⁵⁰ that “some of those streets are not fit for ladies” (307). Here Margaret is physically denying her position as a

⁵⁰ Edith has been worrying all along that Margaret’s new devotion to her duties will ruin her sense of humour and her sense of fashion, and make her “strong-minded” (378). Margaret promises not to let the first two horrors come about, but says nothing about the third.

“lady,” going to places that theoretically place her on the same footing, if only briefly, with those she means to be a friend to. These allusions to the places that Margaret goes suggest that by the time Thornton reappears and her life takes another direction, Margaret is out among the poor busily and capably doing what she can to be helpful. Philanthropy in both novels is a way of showing how people can be connected on a sympathetic level, opposed to the conflict of capitalist relations. In *North and South* it is further an example of how interrelations between middle and working-class people are constrained by ideas of power, and that even the power of charity is limiting for the giver. Where Mary needs to learn to transcend her wish to be idle, Margaret has to learn to reject her idea of herself as powerful and responsible because of her class position. As they learn to effectively act to help others, Mary and Margaret both become agents in their own destiny, and act to help themselves.

Mary Barton begins her story as the object of the love of two men, and as she becomes active, appreciating work over idleness, she takes her romantic trajectory into her own hands, firmly refusing Harry Carson and then rushing off to Liverpool to perform various feats and thus secure the safety, and love, of Jem Wilson. She initially intends to marry Carson because she is “ambitious, and did not favour Mr. Carson the less because he was rich and a gentleman” (122). As she toils away at work, she dreams about “some day becoming a lady, and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood” (122). The Carson daughters, whom Mary admires from afar and wishes to be like, are exposed at home in their drawing room, where, “like many similarly-situated young ladies, they did not exactly know what to do to while away the time until the tea-hour” (265). Their mother is yet worse-off, feeling “very poorly,” and “indulging in the luxury of a headache” (264). The narrator makes no bones about Mrs. Carson’s problem; it is “the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed” (264). Mrs. Carson herself was once a factory girl, and her physical inability to cope with leisure – the narrator claims that “if she might have taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week” it “would have done her more good than all the ether and sal-volatile she was daily in the habit of swallowing” (264) – foreshadows Mary’s future should she marry the son. The authority and power that should come with money absolutely deprive Mrs. Carson not only of agency but of her health. Immediately after refusing Jem, Mary feels that “her life hereafter would be dreary and blank” (180) and begins to revile Carson and the “hollow vanities” of “all the circumstances of ease and luxury” (181) that he represents. Mary’s realization of the value of Jem over the life

of idleness that she imagined before makes her yearn to act, but she comes to “the unusual wisdom of resolving to do nothing” (182), feeling that Jem “would never be content with one rejection; she believed she could not in his place” (182). In fact she is not content, but she is convinced it is not her place to act.⁵¹ In spite of her attempt to “have womanly patience” (182), Mary finds herself frustrated, wearied, and oppressed (191). Mary wants to know “what can *I do* to bring him back to me” (194, emphasis mine). Eventually even the narrator chimes in with impatience, “Oh Jem, Jem, why did you not come” (210), and compares Mary’s state to that of Tennyson’s Mariana: “Mary’s cry was ever the old moan of the Moated Grange ... ‘I am aweary, aweary’” (210). Mary’s Mariana moment is the low-point of her career. It is what R.S. Edgecombe calls “the soul-destroying sedentariness and passivity of despair” (54). However, while Edgecombe argues that in *Mary Barton* “Gaskell presents hope as the key to action” (54), I suggest that for Mary it is the other way around, and that action is the means by which to procure hope and ultimately satisfaction, even if it involves being thought unfeminine.

Mary does not sink in her weariness, but rather can and must forgo that resolution to do nothing in order to save Jem, acting in the public and masculine realm⁵² to do so. When Jem is arrested for the murder of Harry Carson, Mary is given reason to put off the restrictions of femininity in the emergency of rescuing him. Once she is presented with the evidence of his innocence by Esther,⁵³ Mary discovers that Jem has an alibi in Will Wilson and determines to go fetch him. When Job Legh suggests that it would be better that he be the one to go, Mary “could not bear the idea of deputing to anyone the active measures necessary to be taken in order to save Jem. She felt as if they were her duty, her right” (353). As Edgecombe points out, “Gaskell stresses again and again that the enterprise is a taxing one” (56), for Mary is out of her element in many ways. What is most daunting and challenging about both chasing Will down and testifying at Jem’s trial is that Mary’s reputation as a chaste woman is at stake. Gaskell significantly suggests Mary’s willingness to risk even her reputation – and the dangers it faces – makes her actions that much more valuable. The captain of Will’s ship calls Mary “a disgraceful name” (372) and Mrs. Sturgis, who takes her in in spite of it, thinks that because she is alone in the city Mary must be “a bad one” (392). The trial itself is an even tougher test, as Mary has to publicly

⁵¹ Margaret Legh points out “Men are so queer, they like to have a’ the courting to themselves” (194).

⁵² For feminist discussions of the power and agency that women gain by their public actions and by the sexualisation of those actions, see Harman (46-75) and Rosemarie Bodenheimer (62-68).

⁵³ Esther’s concern for her niece is strong enough that she, though drunk and destitute, is able to make “a plan” and “a course of action to look forward to” (304).

declare her intimate feelings. According to Laura Struve, “society’s perception of women’s inherent moral virtue allows these characters to testify about their own feelings ... yet the public act of testifying places their virtue in jeopardy” (2). The reader knows that Mary is virtuous, but the trial attendees do not.⁵⁴ Mary is initially “indignant” that the lawyer “should dare to ask her to tell, before the multitude assembled there, what woman usually whispers with blushes and tears, and many hesitations, into one ear alone” (404-405). But she gets over the inertia of social strictures and, feeling that “the present was everything,” decides there will be “no feminine shame to stand between her and her avowal” (405). It is after all, though on a public scale, what she has wanted to do since Jem stormed out after his proposal, to speak “as man would do to man” (231). The courtroom testimony is Mary’s elaborate but effective confession of her love, and the boat trip her necessary and effective means of saving Jem while keeping the secret of her father’s guilt, something that neither Jem nor John Barton is able to do. She is at least temporarily the hero of the story and she is able to act heroically because she comes out of a different, feminine way of thinking, educated by Alice and the doctrine of immediate, helpful friendship. Acting outside of the feminine realm, and in spite of what others think and say, Mary is able to bring about her own happiness.

In *North and South* Margaret Hale also plays the role of the hero, doing what is necessary for the good of her family and herself. Both of Margaret’s parents are so ineffective that she is essentially the decision maker in the Hale household, and the person who has to carry out everything that needs to be done. Indeed, more so than Mary Barton, Margaret has been identified with a “hard masculinity of character” (Campbell 246) and as “a masculinised heroine” (Sussman 64), although for the most part her strengths and actions are feminine ones. She tells her mother of her father’s religious crisis and decision to leave Helstone, though she “did dislike it, did shrink from it more than anything she had ever had to do in her life before” (36). In turn, Margaret has to keep her mother’s terminal illness secret from her father, for which he accuses her of cruelty (154). The move and loss of income that result from her father’s decision mean that the Hales are unable to employ any extra servants, and so Margaret herself undertakes much of the physical work of keeping the house. She admits to her father, after having been a guest at the Thorntons’ dinner party, that “I felt like a great hypocrite to-night,

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Starr suggests the complication of the “significant point for the narrator to make her own presence, or lack thereof, explicit” (390) at the trial. This can be read, she argues, “as an indication that the narrator is too reputable to be present at such an unladylike event (though she is not too ladylike to hear about it afterward)” (390).

sitting there in my white silk gown, with my hands idle before me, when I remembered all the good, thorough, house-work they had done to-day” (153). She summons her brother Frederick to England, and after her mother’s death, it is Margaret who “rose from her trembling and despondency, and became as a strong angel of comfort to her father and brother” (229). It is Margaret also who deals with all the arrangements surrounding Mrs. Hale’s death: “All morning she toiled on, longing for rest, but in a continual whirl of melancholy business” (231). All these are feminine duties, but given their due as hard work. What is more, she escorts her father to her mother’s funeral, though he cautions her “My dear, women do not generally go” (244)⁵⁵ because she fears that if he went alone he “should break down utterly” (243). The move to Milton and the changes in her position that come with it serve to establish Margaret’s strength.

Margaret’s masculine act is saving Thornton from the mob, but it is an act that paradoxically draws on the influence of Margaret’s femininity as well as calling it into question. Margaret interprets the public act as a necessary, gendered, but impersonal measure: “any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her revered helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers” (177). The powerlessness of femininity, here “revered helplessness,” Margaret recognizes as the only means by which she can protect Thornton, and it is an effective one. Even after the injury to her physical being and Thornton’s assault on her emotions through his proposal, she thinks, “I would do it again if need were, though it does lead me in to all this shame and trouble” (178). Like Mary’s admission in court, Margaret’s action at the riot is interpreted as proof of her romantic love for Thornton. The servants are scandalized that “she’d be so bold and forward as to put her arms around his neck” (167), and Mrs. Thornton not only declares that Margaret must be “a girl in love” (169), but tells her son that “after allowing her feelings so to overcome her, I consider you bound in honour” (171). Margaret’s action, because public and involving physical contact with a man, becomes to

⁵⁵ Women attending the funerals of their parents in spite of social restrictions is a common theme in Gaskell’s fiction. In *Cranford*, Deborah Jenkyns puts aside her grudges to go with Jessie Brown to her father’s funeral in order to give Jessie’s appearance there more propriety (24), and in *Sylvia’s Lovers* Sylvia attends her mother’s funeral. R.K. Webb suggests that Gaskell herself “was much distressed that prior commitments prevented her attending the funeral” (“Gaskells” 169 note 11) of John Ashton Nicholls, a friend. Gaskell’s distress appears rather to be over inconveniencing visitors, however, as her commitments do not conflict with the funeral. She writes that “a friend of ours... is to be buried on Friday morning, & Mr. Gaskell will have to attend his funeral; and in the afternoon I take my youngest to pay a visit” (*Letters* 574). The fact that she does not intend to go makes the attendance of her female characters at funerals perhaps more of a statement of their independence.

everyone's view except her own,⁵⁶ absolute proof of her romantic designs on Mr. Thornton. In her own mind, however, Margaret's motivation is simply to prevent violence. She insists that Thornton go down and face the mob in order both to "save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here" and not to "let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad" (161). Seeing that her advice has instead put him in harm's way, she realizes it is up to her to save him: "Another moment, and Mr. Thornton might be smitten down, – he whom she had urged and goaded to come to this perilous place. She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond" (163). A pebble that was aimed at Thornton hits Margaret and her subsequent faint and injury subdue the violent crowd, as they silently watch "open-eyed and open-mouthed, the thread of dark-red blood which wakened them up from their trance of passion" (163). Thus when Mr. Thornton walks into the crowd crying "Now kill me, if it is your brutal will" (164), Margaret, though she lies semi-conscious on the stoop, has accomplished her object. Thornton's challenges are ignored, for "the retrograde movement toward the gate had begun" (164). In taking the blow herself, Margaret saves the Irish scab workers and Mr. Thornton from the angry violent crowd, and the crowd from the repercussions of their own violence, for Thornton grimly notes that he hears the soldiers coming "just five minutes too late to make this vanished mob feel the power of authority and order" (164). It is not authority that ends the riot, but the opposite. It is Margaret's absolute lack of physical or financial or any official kind of control over the people that paradoxically does bring them under control. Margaret's motives in her mind are humanitarian, although the interpretations of others and her subsequent marriage to Mr. Thornton suggest that her actions in saving Mr. Thornton from bodily harm also stem from more intimate feelings⁵⁷ that she is not aware of. In either case, though, she accomplishes her aims, sacrificing, though she does not realize it at the moment, her feminine reputation in order to save people from physical violence. Margaret's gender is what disrupts the riot, but in acting she places her privileged femininity in question.

⁵⁶ And Mr. Thornton's initially, although it inspires his admission of his love for her, and he allows his mother's belief that it means Margaret loves him to sway him.

⁵⁷ As Margaret rushes out to Thornton from inside the safety of the house, she notices the "stormy passions" (162) of the angry workers. As Margaret stands with her arms around his neck, the narrator comments that the rioters' "reckless passions had carried them too far" (163). While the passions manifest in different ways, the close association of the word with Margaret's actions in the scene does suggest her romantic feelings for Thornton. See Jill Matus's discussion of emotional and psychic states in the novel ("*Mary Barton*" 35-44) for further thoughts on passion.

Margaret does the same thing again when she lies about being at the station, putting her own reputation as a chaste and modest woman in jeopardy to make sure that her brother's life is secure. She sacrifices her peace of mind knowing that Mr. Thornton thinks she is lying and doing so because of some unsavory relationship with a man; a sacrifice made more poignant by the fact that she is in love with him, thus a sacrifice of her chances at marital happiness. In this situation, Margaret feels her gender restricts her power to act: "I wish I were a man, that I could go and force him to express his disapprobation, and tell him honestly that I knew I deserved it. It seems hard to lose him as a friend just when I had begun to feel his value" (281). Thornton learns the truth through an accidental comment of Higgins's, and it is "a comfort – a relief" (383) to him. Margaret, though, does not know of her redemption in his eyes, and thus when she saves him again, this time by imposing her finances between him and ruin instead of her body between him and a stone, she is also redeeming herself for that lie. Her plan for investing in Thornton's mill, which she insists is purely business and that "the principal advantage would be on her side" (394), is of course not merely a business proposal at all. It is a way of regaining Mr. Thornton's respect and love. Her frustration with not being able to sort out Thornton's impression of her following the lie shows the ways in which female agency can be limited by social demands for modesty; however, the shame she feels is in some regard the sacrifice she makes in order to accomplish the things that she does. In acting for herself and for her lover, Margaret is both more and less effective than Mary Barton. She acts in a physical – interpreted as sexual – capacity to first rescue Mr. Thornton, and then she rescues him, and all his workers, again economically. However, the interference of other people and their needs and assumptions, as well as the fact that Margaret does not admit that she loves Mr. Thornton until the very end of the book, make her motivations more complicated than Mary's.

The marriages at the end of *Mary Barton* and *North and South* have been the cause of much disappointment to critical readers, who find that they undermine the importance of the social messages of the novels by locating resolution in romance, or that they undermine any feminist message by showing the strength and independence gained by Mary and Margaret to be only temporary. Stoneman reads the ending of *Mary Barton* as "paradoxically exclud[ing] the working-class heroine" (79), because through "necessity" Mary "reasoned, spoke and acted in the public world... but her role ends with this enablement of her menfolk" (55). Mary's enablement of Jem, who, though a virtuous, talented, and hard-working man, has been prevented

by circumstances arising from his position as a working-class man from being able to act on his own behalf, is precisely the point. Critics who look for more action from Mary at the end of the novel ignore the fact that her actions bring about the happy ending.⁵⁸ After she has rescued Jem and they have married and emigrated to Canada, we see Mary “At the door of the house, looking towards the town... watching the return of her husband from his daily work” (482). She is located firmly in the feminine domestic, while he is remasculinised by the very fact of that daily work. While it does not solve class conflict, the happy ending does re-imagine life for the couple, moving them both away from the economic system that threatens men like Jem and John Barton. Just as Gaskell finds alternatives to the stagnation of the masculine world in the immediate, active agency cultivated in the feminine, she locates resolution for her protagonists in an alternative place, away from industrial conflict. The Canada that Mary and Jem end up in is not only a fresh start, but a Utopia, where economic oppression does not appear to exist. Gaskell’s idealized vision of Canada in the mid nineteenth century ignores the realities of the cultural, economic, environmental, and social tensions and traumas that existed there. This is problematic, but it also serves to reinforce Gaskell’s interest in imagining a way of life that can challenge or at least escape the greed and selfishness that seem to control the Manchester of the novel. Canada as a real place is not important; rather, the fantasy of a place where class differences and economic hardships do not exist is Mary’s reward for her part in resolving the story, as is her own return to the domestic, made more pleasant by the relative prosperity of her family. In Jem’s case, it is his situation and not his attitude that is the real problem, and so removing him from the situation to an admittedly unrealistic alternative is a way to solve the problem. Mary’s agency gives Jem back his power, which allows her to return to the feminine position that will continue to cultivate sympathy and agency.

In *North and South* it is because she is a woman that Margaret is able to heal the class schisms to the extent that she does, and because she is a woman and he a man that Thornton cannot take her advice or her money without also taking her hand in marriage. By marrying, Thornton and Margaret restore the balance of power, as he takes back economic responsibility, freeing her to continue to cultivate the agency of sympathy, which influence will be necessary

⁵⁸ The very nature of novelistic endings is partially what is in question here, for like most heroes in novels, Mary is rewarded for her deeds with a sense of hard-won tranquility and retirement. The tensions between possibilities that are opened in narratives and the endings that close them down is discussed by D.A. Miller, who argues that when it comes to traditional novels, “reduction is the necessary price of settlement” (89). The wrapping-up of the action necessarily entails the wrapping up of Mary’s role as hero, but her potential has been revealed.

for the successful running of the mill.⁵⁹ Stoneman is much more satisfied with this ending than with that of *Mary Barton*, finding that it “reveals a situation which requires the active and continuing mediation of its heroine” (79) to uphold feminine values in “a class struggle expressed in terms of masculine aggression”(79). However, Pearl Brown conversely finds “at the conclusion of *North and South*, three men, not Margaret herself, determine her future” (349), suggesting that Margaret lacks agency altogether. This might be the case if Margaret simply kept her inheritance and the control and even independence that comes with it, but what Brown ignores is that by choosing to marry Thornton and give up her monetary power to him, Margaret is making an active choice. Margaret’s motivation in investing in Thornton’s mill and in Thornton himself, in spite of what she says, is romantic as well as philanthropic; she wins her husband just as Mary wins hers. Where Mary’s actions change Jem’s situation, Margaret’s change Thornton’s perspective, as well as revitalizing him economically and personally by allowing him to work. His capitulation to her in matters of the negotiation of class and how to relate to his workers is excusable precisely because it is a matter of romance. Masculine power is at the mercy of feminine influence. As Susan Johnston points out, Margaret’s relinquishing of her independence to him is perhaps similarly excusable: “Margaret’s right to submit to authority only when the validity of that authority has been confirmed by her own reason is, finally, the point of Gaskell’s novel” (133). Part of Margaret’s agency is precisely that she can relinquish her power to Thornton. Having established the theme of female agency coming to the rescue when male power is stymied, Gaskell suggests that it is not only Margaret’s right to submit to masculine authority, now educated in feminine feeling, but that it is her duty to do so, because of the influence she will have over that authority. In this way *North and South* presents a more radical argument than *Mary Barton*, because Margaret has a profound effect on Thornton’s worldview. The complexity of the marriage in *North and South*, where Margaret actually gives up the power of financial independence and financial control over Thornton’s mill suggests Gaskell’s developing thinking in terms of the balance of power and gender. As a wife, Margaret will be less powerful, but she will maintain her agency, which as a wealthy mill owner she would have sacrificed. Just as Thornton has learned to value the perspective of sympathy that Margaret

⁵⁹ When Sussman argues that in *North and South* “the masculine plot is short-circuited by the marriage plot. Thornton marries Margaret” (66), because Thornton is removed from the entirely male community of life among his factory workers, he ignores the essential point that it is Margaret’s influence, which is the result of her gendered position, that gives the role of effective man back to Thornton.

has taught him, she has learned through her attempts at philanthropy and friendship that less official power can mean more actual agency.

Parker argues that the ending of *North and South* “highlights what most romantic plots hide: Margaret’s and Thornton’s marriage is a business arrangement; all marriages are” (1). To an extent this is the case, as it is with Mary’s marriage to Jem, but the arrangements are ones in which abilities and powers as well as material goods are exchanged. Margaret and Mary bring their agency to their marriages and thus empower their husbands. Even though resolution in both novels is found in traditional marriage, the means by which Mary and Margaret achieve those resolutions are not traditional, most obviously in the fact that they are the active subjects of their own romances, rather than the passive objects. In her description of the energy and labor that defines Milton in *North and South*, Gaskell finishes by wondering what all the work is in aid of, and what the entire struggle is aimed towards. In these two novels, by showing the distinct and immediate goal of the work that women do, and the clear motivation behind it, she further questions the ends of the kinds of work that men do, or, in the case of strikes and work stoppages, do not. What Gaskell ends up doing in creating stories where women act and men stagnate is presenting an alternative to hegemonic gender ideology that is radically feminist in the way that it suggests women’s capabilities and agency in contrast with men’s, but still conservative in that those capabilities are ultimately used to reinstate traditional concepts of resolution and fulfillment for women and to uphold the importance of separate genders and separate spheres. The separation is essential, however, so that when it becomes necessary to seek a different perspective and to try a different way of relating, there are examples at hand. In these two novels Gaskell shows how the feminine perspective of sympathy contributes to re-visioning the masculine world of politics, economy, and labor. As she moves to the even more contentious subject of the fallen woman, the different roles that men and women play become both more complicated and more important.

Chapter Two

“Such a pretty, probable story”: Gender, Agency, Fallenness, and Fictions in “Lizzie Leigh” and *Ruth*

In a letter to her sister-in-law Anne Robson, Elizabeth Gaskell responds to criticism she has been facing over the publication of *Ruth*, regretting that “‘An unfit subject for fiction’ is *the* thing to say about it... but I am determined notwithstanding to speak my mind” (*Letters* 220). *Ruth* (1853) is certainly Gaskell’s most sustained discussion of that unfit subject, the fallen woman, but she had spoken her mind previously in her portrait of Esther in *Mary Barton* (1848) and in her short story “Lizzie Leigh,” published in instalments in the inaugural numbers of Dickens’s *Household Words* magazine in 1850, but written or at least begun several years earlier.⁶⁰ The fallen woman, then, was a theme to which Gaskell found herself returning to explore as the centre of a full-length novel in *Ruth*. Of Gaskell’s three fallen women, only Lizzie Leigh lives beyond the end of her story, and while each of the three has a child, Ruth’s son is the only one of those three children who survives. Gaskell is not unusual, as most fictional Victorian fallen women face early deaths, or the early deaths of their children. The deaths that take place in “Lizzie Leigh” and *Ruth*, however, serve to renegotiate and challenge traditional conventions which punish the fallen woman for her sexual sin, rather than reinforce them. In taking fallenness as her subject, Gaskell’s point is to deny the traditional trajectory that suggests once a woman has had a sexual relationship outside of marriage she is necessarily on a road to ruin, degradation, and death. In “Lizzie Leigh” Gaskell makes her challenge through the active agency of the female characters, especially Lizzie’s mother Anne, who refuses to believe that the “lost” Lizzie cannot be found and redeemed. Sympathy and care for the individual are distinctly feminine traits in “Lizzie Leigh,” juxtaposed with masculine commitment to the ideology that judges the fallen woman as a type, condemns her for her shame, and considers her morally contaminating and irretrievably lost to respectable society. The problematic ending of “Lizzie Leigh” is meant to demonstrate to readers the value of the feminine sympathetic perspective which in turn is cultivated by patriarchal concepts of men as authority. In *Ruth* Gaskell queries the division of sympathy along the lines of gender, moving beyond a straightforward opposition of values between men and women and complicating male reactions by considering more fully

⁶⁰ Jenny Uglow speculates that the story was likely one of Gaskell’s first, initially written sometime in the early 1830s (125). Margaret Homans dates it as 1838 (224).

the social motivations behind them. Though it has been read as both the punishment and the final redemption of the fallen woman, the ending of *Ruth* has more to do with Ruth's status within the marriage plots of the book than with her role as a fallen woman. The ideal of marriage, in Ruth's case, proves in reality to be less attractive than remaining under the stigma of fallenness. Thus, while "Lizzie Leigh" challenges the fictional trajectory of the fallen woman, *Ruth* also challenges the even more sacred plot of the traditional romance, where love and marriage equal resolution and fulfillment for women. In *Ruth* Gaskell presents nursing as a career in which traditionally feminine – even ladylike – talents and sentiments can be exercised as a fulfilling alternative to marriage. However, she still worries about what women have to lose if they begin to occupy the same authoritative positions that men do. As in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, male agency is restricted by the social and economic institutions that supposedly give men power, while women have the liberty to follow their sympathies and feelings without having to consider the consequences to society in general – in this case, the more abstract ideal of patriarchal moral authority and responsibility for female sexual innocence. Thus, ironically, while women are in many ways more constrained than men by social convention that desires to keep them protected and sheltered, in the matter of being able to follow their natural impulses for doing good and effecting change, and thus to care for rather than condemn their fellow human beings, Gaskell suggests they are much freer than men. In "Lizzie Leigh" and in more complicated ways in *Ruth*, Gaskell uses the fallen woman as a springboard to query fictional trajectories of women's lives, and to suggest alternatives as well as to posit the necessity of compromise and of different perspectives and degrees of authority. Agency in "Lizzie Leigh" and in *Ruth* belongs to women who help those who are the victims of masculine self-interest and the inertia of responsibility.

The Victorian fallen woman's mythology and status is one that builds from a centuries-long history of religious and cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality, virginity, and paternity.⁶¹ Though pre-Christian and early Christian traditions had concerns about sexual morality, illegitimacy, adultery, and paternity, the state of premarital fallenness develops prominence in the centuries leading up to the nineteenth as marriage itself, at least the actual wedding, becomes a more formal and less negotiable affair. It was not until the sixteenth century in England that a

⁶¹ The concept of a fallen state in Christian mythology refers to humanity in general, fallen from Paradise through original sin. Female fallenness in particular, associated with Eve's role as temptress in Eden, is most often associated with the sexual.

wedding had to be presided over by a religious official in order to make it the legal ceremony after which sexual relations between the couple could take place. Prior to this marriages were less public and more easily made, and therefore premarital sexual behaviour was not as easy to discover or to condemn (Wiesner-Hanks 72-4). Even following the law, however, estimates are that between twenty and fifty percent of brides in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were already pregnant by the time of their weddings (Wiesner-Hanks 81), suggesting that admonishments for abstinence were not always effective. It should be noted that many of the statistics and, in fact, many of the fallen women in the fiction are from the working classes. Because paternity was a greater concern among the aristocracy due to the inheritance of wealth as well as of title, women's sexuality was more stringently curbed, and though instances of pre and extra marital sex very likely existed, there were more pressing reasons for keeping them very secret than in the lower classes. Due to the ever-increasing influence of the Bourgeois in the nineteenth century, the standards of the aristocracy became increasingly adapted by the middle class, and applied to the working class. Up until and including the eighteenth century, while it carried with it varied amounts of public shame and punishment, the bearing of an illegitimate child, at least among working-class women, was more of an economic than a moral tragedy. Merry Wiesner-Hanks points out that there were different reactions based on the economic stability of different regions, and that when labour was in short supply moral objections to employing unwed mothers disappeared (82). She further notes that other forms of sexual deviance, ostensibly equally morally reprehensible with those that might produce illegitimate children were less likely to cause outrage because they "did not lead to a child who might require public support" (88). In very general terms, it seems that if a woman's sexual experiments outside of marriage did not interfere with inheritance or cause financial burdens on the state, they were not particularly hard to forgive. In the eighteenth century, fallenness figures in literature, but, as Tanya Evans argues, in "chapbooks and ballads, pre-marital sex was represented as commonplace and female sexual desire as given" (21). Though there is an aspect of female shame, Evans also notes that abandoned women "could be depicted as wily and resourceful" and as such "were frequently rewarded with marriage" (27). Instead of acting solely as a deterrent against female premarital sex, she suggests these tales "also warned men not to cheat on women, otherwise they would receive their comeuppance" (28). This is a key difference from nineteenth-century tales of sex and betrayal, where the focus is on the woman's shame visited on her for her

sin, and the sense of tragedy and hopelessness that accompanied it. In her study of the rhetoric employed in unwed mothers' petitions to have their children received at the London Foundling Hospital, Samantha Williams determines that a change at the turn of the nineteenth century from an emphasis on the financial need of the mother to her potential to reform is evidence of a "new ethos that material aid was useful only if it brought about moral reform and rehabilitation" (90). Because of this, Williams argues, the figure of the fallen woman as pathetic victim became prevalent, because charity demanded that her sexual indiscretion be described in terms of passive seduction and abandonment, rather than the terms of misfortune popular in the preceding century (97). In order to plead repentance and the possibility of reform, ironically, the deed which led to the illegitimate child had to be construed as the mother's sin, but sin in which the woman is passive and victimised.⁶² The stereotype that arises from situations like these is that of the tragedy of fallenness; a stereotype that is perpetuated through popular, literary, and artistic culture, and which in its various permutations is used to serve various ideological functions.

In Victorian fiction, the fallen woman was a character "whose destiny was fixed by convention" (Bick 17) and the convention was one of hopelessness. The common literary trajectory of the Victorian fallen woman shows her quick descent, after her initial sexual indiscretion, into physical and mental desperation, abandonment, prostitution, poverty, sickness, infanticide, overwhelming guilt, and usually death, often by suicide. Redemption and reintegration into the kind of "healthy" society she once knew is generally not one of the fallen woman's options, no-matter how innocent she may have been to begin with, or how repentant she is for her sin. In *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, however, Judith Walkowitz finds that contrary to fictional expectations, the "stereotyped sequence of girls seduced, pregnant, and abandoned to the streets fitted only a small minority of women who ultimately moved to prostitution" (18) and that rather in many cases "entry into prostitution seems to have been voluntary and gradual" (13) as well as temporary. Sally Mitchell makes a similar point in *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835 – 1880*, as she notices the "hypocrisy" rampant in family magazines where "although the letters columns demonstrate that women who have been unchaste often live long enough to inquire what surnames their daughters should use on their marriage certificates, the fiction demands punishment, suffering and death"

⁶² Other criteria for accepting a woman's petition included her ability to regain employment and, most interestingly, the relative secrecy surrounding her pregnancy (Williams 88-9). This seems a tacit acknowledgement on the part of the hospital that the sin was one that could be overlooked if the consequences were invisible.

(16).⁶³ Statistics on illegitimate births also suggest that premarital sex was not on the decline, in spite of the horror of fallenness. The register of illegitimate births in England reaches its peak in 1850, unchallenged again until after World War Two (Levene et al. 6). In the face of this evidence, the fictional tragedy of the fallen woman falls down. Journalistic and other non-fictional literature of the Victorian period also engages with the fallen woman and often finds evidence that contradicts the stereotype, suggesting that the reality is much more complex than the seduced innocent turned prostitute, drunk and dead early, image of fiction and art. W. R. Greg's ominous claim in the *Westminster Review* in 1850 that the "career of these women is a brief one; their downward path a marked and inevitable one; and they know this well. They are almost never rescued; escape themselves they cannot" (qtd. in Fisher 62), is challenged by other perspectives. Dickens's 1853 report on the success of Urania Cottage,⁶⁴ suggests not only that some fallen women were rescuable, but that they could get respectable employment and that some went on to marriage (322). Dickens gives the purpose of the refuge as to "replace young women who had already lost their characters and lapsed into guilt, into a situation of hope" and to turn them into "a blessing to themselves and others instead of a curse" (321). Like Greg, Dickens condemns the fallen state, but he is not without hope, and statistics to back it up, for the potential to find and redeem these women. William Acton, a doctor specialising in venereal disease, in his 1857 book on the subject categorically debunks the stereotype and points out "vulgar errors" such as "the notion that the career of the woman who once quits the pinnacle of virtue involves [a] very swift decline and ultimate loss of health, modesty, and temporal prosperity" finding that "the downward progress and death of the prostitute... are exceptional"

⁶³ Another popular option for the fictional fallen woman is to move her to a foreign land, where she is no-longer a threat to the moral atmosphere of those left behind. In *David Copperfield* (1849) Dickens's Little Emily emigrates, and Hetty Sorrel, in Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), is sentenced to transportation instead of death. When the fallen woman is not the novel's main protagonist, but rather, like Emily and Hetty and even Marian Erle in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), peripheral to the eponymous characters, their fate is not necessarily to die, but to be taken away from the men who might otherwise be their husbands. Hetty very significantly dies on her way back to England. Wilkie Collins's later work, *The New Magdalen* (1873), while it unites the fallen woman with her virtuous lover in marriage, has to send the couple away from England in order to project a happy ending for them. These works also challenge the traditional trajectory; to send the fallen woman away because there is no place for her alive in England is surely, in some cases at least, a commentary on the failure of English society to provide one. On the other hand, it is perhaps as much a failure on the part of the stories because they cannot imagine the fallen woman's acceptance or reintegration into society.

⁶⁴ Urania Cottage, a shelter and reformatory for homeless women in London, was established by philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts in 1847, under the guidance of Dickens. The intent of the college was to get women, mostly prostitutes, off of the streets and to encourage them to emigrate. The scheme was for the most part successful on a small scale, as Jenny Hartley's recent investigation of Urania and its inmates discovers: "Thirty flourishing emigrants in the first five years would add up to about a hundred over the fifteen years of the Home's life" (245).

(33). Firsthand accounts from prostitutes themselves seem to back up Acton's findings. A letter to the *Times* in 1848, from an anonymous woman identifying herself as a prostitute, defends the occupation while at the same time denying the myth that most girls become prostitutes after being seduced, though some might claim that is the case (qtd. in Fisher 40-43). In one of Henry Mayhew's many interviews with prostitutes, some of whom conform to the stereotype and some of whom do not, one woman responds to questions about her past by pointing out her awareness of the expectation: "Oh, I'm a seduced milliner," she said, rather impatiently; "anything you like" (4.224). The typical story of seduction is so pervasive, it seems, that it is parodically adapted by the prostitute herself, to point out her exasperation with the expectation.⁶⁵ The question is why, then, is this the portrayal that is ubiquitous in the fiction and mythology of the period?

The obvious moral reading of the figure is cautionary, a warning to impressionable young female readers that the loss of sexual purity equals disgrace and eventually death, but her significance is more complicated than simply this. Beyond purity of body, the stereotype also cautioned readers to maintain an appropriate deference to class distinction and to beware of personal vanity. Mayhew's list of the motivations behind prostitution includes not only "low wages inadequate to their sustenance" but also "natural levity" and "love of dress and display, coupled with the desire for a sweetheart" (257). The idea is that certain personality traits can lead a girl down the wrong path. Thus, the tragic fallen woman becomes a warning to thwart the romantic ambitions of working-class girls who might otherwise set their sights on gentlemen,

⁶⁵ Milliners, seamstresses, and needle-workers of any kind were the fictional choice to become fallen women. The growing social consciousness of the period acknowledged the oppressive conditions that needlewomen faced, usually being very poorly paid for the work they did. As Mitchell notes, changes to labor laws governing factory work meant that women were no longer as desirable as employees in factories, as they legally could not work the same hours as men could. Needlework remained an option for women's work, but it was unregulated by any laws (Mitchell 25-6). Fictional pieces like "The Slave of the Needle," published in the *London Journal* in 1850, make the inevitable connection between the image of the starving needlewoman and the desperate prostitute. As is the case in *Ruth*, needlework presents another danger, as it throws unprotected young women in the paths of irresponsible gentlemen. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell begins to interrogate the stereotype, as Esther's fall is attributed to her work in the factories and to the fact that she was spoiled by the good wages she earned there. John Barton wants to protect his daughter from a similar fate and so encourages her to become a dressmaker instead, at which profession she first meets Harry Carson, her would-be seducer. However, the fallen woman Gaskell helped to emigrate, Pasley, (see note 68 pg 67) was herself a seamstress, adding some veracity to the typical fiction. Deborah Denenholz Morse's article, "Stitching Repentance, Sewing Rebellion: Seamstresses and Fallen Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction," provides an in-depth discussion of the relationship, suggesting that figure was not only a warning or a call for sympathy, but "since Victorian women of all classes were taught to sew, there is an obvious subversiveness to these insistent portrayals of sewing women" (31). Morse further notices the repeated image, in Gaskell and elsewhere, of a fallen woman sewing as a means of redemption.

and more broadly, to reinforce the existence of class boundaries in a way which makes them seem natural and inevitable. The fallen woman also presented a case against the growing demand for female autonomy. She was used to suggest that female economic independence was the top of a slippery slope at the bottom of which was tragic fallenness. Any sort of work or activity that took a woman away from her father's or her husband's home could be associated with promiscuity and therefore construed as dangerous.⁶⁶ On the other hand, as Nina Auerbach argues, the fallen woman's position was one that allowed artists and writers to imagine female lives and relationships lived "beyond the pale of family" (*Woman* 153). She points out too that the fallen woman was subject to a "dual perspective... an explicit narrative that abases the woman" and "an iconographic pattern that exalts her" (168), suggesting ultimately "the transforming power, not of her redemption, but of her will to rise" (180). For Auerbach, the critique that the fallen woman offers through the societal hypocrisy of her tragedy makes her death always an act of heroism, and places her in a more empowered position than that of the Victorian wife, because she is "dangerously, tragically, and triumphantly beyond social boundaries" (150). The Victorian obsession with the figure of the fallen woman is a challenge to those boundaries. As she appears in stereotype in much of the fiction of the period, then, and as she reflects the ideologies of the period and rewrites the reality of the experience of the actual unchaste woman's life, the lost fallen woman becomes a nucleus of meaning on various political and social levels, and often a means by which to serve conservative agendas and to preserve the status quo of class and gender hierarchies. At the same time, she is used to challenge deeply-held beliefs about the nature of sin and the hypocrisy of gender relations, and to suggest that the tragedy is not the sin but rather society's condemnation of it.

The fiction also reflects the historical fact of the involvement of women on a practical level in the redemption of fallen women, an involvement that was itself controversial and challenging to the *status quo*. Ironically, because of the value placed on the feminine virtues of selflessness and passivity, idealised womanhood could be construed as a condition for fallenness. Basch points out that the concept was a common one, using examples from Greg and Mayhew to show that the "desire for abrogation was often seen as a specifically feminine trait that could

⁶⁶ See Françoise Basch's interrogation of the paternalistic argument to limit women's work in *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (135 – 40). Also see Jill L. Matus's chapter "The making of the moral mother: representation of working-class sexuality in *Mary Barton*" in *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (56-88, esp. 65-8) for an excellent discussion of Gaskell and the equation of women's financial independence and moral ruin.

incite the lost ewe to sacrifice her virtue” (Basch 201). Mitchell suggests that this theme is treated in a straightforward manner in *Ruth* (31), and Amanda Anderson demonstrates how in “the case of Ruth’s fall, then, it becomes difficult to distinguish the cure from the cause.... the cause of Ruth’s fall, unthinking sympathy, is also an index of her goodness” (128).⁶⁷ The passive nature of the perfect Victorian woman, whether it leads to her fall or to her success as a wife, however, is the binary complement to the ideal of the active and decisive Victorian man. Anderson argues, for example, that the fallen woman reflects broader concerns with choice and determinism, and that although “a specific form of selfless virtue was allotted to women, it is crucial to understand that fallenness was predominantly defined in opposition to a masculine ideal of rational control and purposive action” (36). In a similar vein, Mary Poovey points to the way in which images of idealised femininity – even fallen – “constituted the basis for the oppositional economy that seemed to (but did not) rest on a binary opposition and for the fundamental model of male identity in capitalist society” (9). The fallen woman in particular becomes a foil for masculine identity; her passiveness is the opposite of his rigorous self-control, and her sin the opposite of his virtue. As we have come to expect in Gaskell, though, men are not always able to live up to the ideal, and so the passive fallen woman’s role is made more complex. Effective activity and agency in “Lizzie Leigh” belongs entirely to female characters, eventually even the fallen Lizzie herself. Beyond the active measures that the women within the story take, “Lizzie Leigh” promotes a sense of sisterly sympathy and identification which blurs the lines between fallen and pure woman. Here then is another role for the fallen woman – she is a means by which to bring women together, and an impetus for female action. This role is reflected in the history of the period too, for “pure” women (including Gaskell herself)⁶⁸ did involve themselves in the charitable and practical matters of helping their “fallen” counterparts, which led to progressive measures such as Josephine Butler’s organization of the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, a unification of women for a cause

⁶⁷Of further interest is Beth Kalikoff’s argument that George Eliot’s “Maggie Tulliver’s desire to be good is at the heart of her most severe temptation” (363). By showing how their heroines are primed for the fall, Eliot and Gaskell reveal the double-bind that the exaltation of passive capitulation to male desire places women in, if they are subsequently to be punished for precisely that capitulation.

⁶⁸Gaskell was involved in numerous charitable groups and activities through her husband’s ministry. Of particular interest is her action on behalf of a young prostitute called Pasley, for whom Gaskell arranged passage to Australia with the help of Dickens. In fact, Gaskell used part of the money Dickens paid for “Lizzie Leigh” to provide for Pasley’s journey. See Uglow (319-20) and Mitchell (39).

which was a springboard for organized feminism.⁶⁹ In spite of objections like the one made in 1848 in *The Quarterly Review* by an anonymous author who claims “Ladies’ Committees” cannot help the fallen, for not only would “the very tenderness of their natures... stand in the way of proper treatment; for true pity often requires a mixture of severity,” but they may become tainted by association with “such a knowledge of evil as must be learnt in dealing with the fallen members of their sex” (“Short Account” 375-6), women were involved in trying to improve the lives and futures of other women. This practical social activism suggests that there is an answer to the problem of the fallen woman, and it is therefore a challenge to the ideologies she is made to stand for. In particular, the activity of women working to devictimize other women threatens a masculine identity which defines itself largely in opposition to helpless femininity. Perhaps this is why, as Laura Hapke discovers, female writers were much more likely to depict women helping women in their fiction, while men like Dickens and Trollope who deal with the rescue of the fallen woman “combine a protective attitude toward women, including immoral ones, with the conviction that “pure” women cannot help” (18). In both her personal actions and her fiction, Gaskell suggests that they most certainly can.

Ruth and “Lizzie Leigh” predate Acton and the journalistic accounts of the reality of fallenness by a few years. However, her own personal involvement with Dickens’s efforts meant that Gaskell was acquainted with realities as well as with fictional expectations. Still, Gaskell uses aspects of the stereotype in her depictions of the fallen woman in order to question other aspects. Ruth is after all a milliner’s apprentice before she is seduced. In “Lizzie Leigh” Gaskell ignores the seduction altogether, in *Mary Barton* Esther’s vanity is involved in her ruin, and in *Ruth* Ruth’s absolute ignorance of sexual motivations or consequences and passivity is the cause of her fall. With the exception of Esther, though, Gaskell departs from the fictional tradition after the seduction has taken place, to show that the downward trajectory can be arrested and turned around. Esther is Gaskell’s first published depiction of the fallen woman, and she is a character who in many ways fits the stereotype. Esther’s ambition for fancy clothes and fine things lead her to run off with a soldier – the most common profession for the stereotypical seducer – with whom she is temporarily happy, but who eventually has to leave her and their child. In order to feed her baby, Esther turns to prostitution and to drink when the child dies, as a means by which

⁶⁹ George Watt notes that Butler was inspired to take up the cause of the fallen woman, first personally and later politically, by reading Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1-2). The Association fought for the human rights of prostitutes.

to block out her pain and her shame. Esther herself dies “nought but skin and bone, with a cough to tear her in two” (*Mary Barton* 480), before Mary has a chance to rescue her. Esther’s purpose is to serve as a foil for Mary, to be a lesson against upward ambition through romance with a rich man, and thus is a very conventional and perhaps simplistic use of the fallen woman. However, the sympathy with which her story is told, Esther’s own effectiveness in the ways in which she helps her niece, and Mary’s idea that she can save her aunt, show that even as she uses the fallen woman as a sort of bogey woman to prevent ambition for vanity’s sake, Gaskell does not make her entirely irredeemable. The reader feels sorry that Mary did not get to Esther in time, not that she was rightfully punished for her sin. Even with her most conformist portrayal of fallenness, Gaskell steps away from the idea that punishment is necessary. “Lizzie Leigh” and *Ruth* build on the challenge to the readers’ expectations of what should happen to the fallen woman.

In “Lizzie Leigh,” Gaskell juxtaposes women’s agency with masculine social paralysis and shows that tragedy can be rectified, if not avoided, by the act of *doing* instead of judging. In doing this, she overthrows the traditional depiction of the fallen woman and challenges her status as irretrievably lost. The tendency among critics is to trace an evolution in Gaskell’s portrayal of the fallen woman from the rather clichéd role that Esther plays, through the more sympathetic story of Lizzie, to the finally quite progressive, provocative, and socially challenging *Ruth*. Marie Fitzwilliam, Deborah Denenholz Morse, and Susan Bick who finds that as “a link between *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, “Lizzie Leigh” is particularly valuable” (21), for example, read “Lizzie Leigh” as a lesser precursor to the later novel. While it is not my intent to challenge that reading entirely, I do want to suggest that Gaskell’s discussion of the figure of the fallen woman in “Lizzie Leigh” is controversial and progressive in its own right, and not simply a stepping stone in a progression which culminates with *Ruth*. In making this argument, there are two aspects of “Lizzie Leigh” worth considering. One is the stark contrast in the story between the sympathetic attitudes of the female characters who actively seek to rectify the problems brought about by Lizzie’s fall and the stubbornly defeatist and dangerously conformist attitudes of the male characters. The other is the tragic death of Lizzie’s illegitimate daughter, an event that appears to suggest that in spite of her sympathetic leanings, Gaskell ultimately finds it necessary to show Lizzie punished for her sexual transgression. I will argue, however, that the death of the child does not reinforce the kind of judgemental thinking voiced by the male characters in the story, but rather suggests that it is wrong to judge and censure other people, that Lizzie does in

fact have the potential to overcome her sin, and that the way in which she can do so is through precisely the kind of active, useful sympathy that is shown to her by the other women in the story. In this reading of agency as the key to Gaskell's vindication of the fallen woman, I depart from critics such as Joanne Thompson and Margaret Homans who argue that "Lizzie Leigh" is a progressive work, but who focus on maternal love as the essential feminist theme in the story. While Lizzie's mother Anne is certainly inspired by her love for her daughter to act, the ability to act comes from her position as a woman more than as a mother.

It is not in the depiction of the fallen woman herself, for Lizzie is almost a peripheral character in the story, but in the way in which different characters respond to her that "Lizzie Leigh" is progressive and challenging. The story is that of a country family's response to learning that their daughter / sister Lizzie, who has been sent to Manchester to work, has been dismissed because her employer discovered her pregnancy. The story begins after the dismissal, on the death-bed of Lizzie's father, and after this Lizzie's mother goes to the city to find the daughter of whom she has had no news since they learned of her disgrace, succeeds, and brings Lizzie home. The pivotal incident of the tale is when Lizzie's own daughter accidentally dies in a fall, which brings Lizzie out of hiding and reunites her with her family. Gaskell deals with the traditional trajectory of the fallen woman in the expectations harboured by Lizzie's father and brother, who construe Lizzie's fall as an irredeemable sin, one which hurts and shames her entire family. She balances those expectations with Lizzie's mother Anne's insistence both that her daughter is not dead nor dead to her, and that what is lost can be found if someone goes out and looks for it. At the same time Gaskell confronts the binary of active man vs. passive woman, flipping it around so that women, even fallen ones, are linked to effective usefulness, while the masculine inability to sympathise becomes a sort of paralysis. The way in which Gaskell brings together Lizzie, Anne, and the model of ideal feminine purity in the story, Susan Palmer, suggests that the reader's sympathies and expectations are meant to come down on their side of the question, and that the kind of attitude taken by Will and his father and enforced by the tradition of inescapable punishment of the fallen woman is wrongheaded and dangerous. Thus, the apparent punishment enacted on Lizzie, the death of her baby girl, seems out of place. Gaskell seems to capitulate to the tradition to some extent, making sure Lizzie is seen to suffer for her sin, thus perpetuating the downward trajectory and seemingly justifying the positions taken by the men in the story. It is this apparent capitulation that has led the majority of critics to

dismiss “Lizzie Leigh” as not quite as substantial a departure from the fallen woman tradition as is *Ruth*, although that novel ends with Ruth’s death, which is similarly problematic. However, the means by which the child dies, the equation of Lizzie and Susan in their role as double mother to the child, and most importantly the emphasis on female sympathetic ability to effect change by insisting that something can be done and then doing it, suggest that the child’s death is a comment on and a condemnation of the kind of judgemental view that requires retribution as the wages of sin.

The split in “Lizzie Leigh” between who is sympathetic and who is judgemental happens along gendered lines and Gaskell establishes this at the beginning of the story as she identifies, challenges, and denies another literary tradition that has to do with gender roles. Gaskell introduces the characters of Anne and James Leigh with a reference to *Paradise Lost*, saying that before the fall of Lizzie, Anne and James were a perfect example of Milton’s dictum that a woman should put all her faith in her husband, who should be her moral authority and interpret the will of god for her. With her invocation of “Milton’s famous line” (205)⁷⁰ Gaskell sets up issues of faith, activity vs. passivity, power, and gender. When James gives their daughter up for dead, Anne is no-longer able to put her faith in him, because she believes he is wrong. Thus, she rebels “against her husband as against a tyrant, with a hidden and sullen rebellion, which tore up the old landmarks of wifely duty and affection” (207). She breaks away from the spirit of that Miltonic rule, but she does not openly challenge her husband’s authority until he is dead, at which point she immediately moves with her sons to Manchester so that she can search for her daughter. By establishing Anne initially as an obedient and self-effacing ideal wife who believes herself morally subordinate to her husband, and then showing her inner rebellion against his decision when it comes to their daughter, Gaskell is able to suggest the extremity of the situation. James’s reaction to his daughter’s fall, which Thompson points out is “harsh” yet “consistent with literary tradition, according to which the fallen woman always dies” (23), is presented as unacceptable to a traditionally-minded and good woman. Anne is no radical, but this situation requires her to re-evaluate both the Miltonic fiction and that of the irretrievable fallen woman. Her virtue is further cemented by the fact that she does not disobey her husband in spite of her belief that he is in the wrong, but waits for his deathbed forgiveness of Lizzie, which frees

⁷⁰ The line Gaskell refers to is “He for God only, she for God in him” (*Paradise Lost* Bk.4, Ln.299)

her to take action. Anne's usual deference to her husband in fact turns out to be empowering, as she is able to believe in the possibility of Lizzie's redemption, and then, when he allows her to, to act on her belief. With the death of the patriarch, absolute masculine authority and unquestioning feminine obedience to it is overthrown as Gaskell opens the way for other endings to the traditional story.

Once the obstacle of her husband's prohibition is lifted, Anne becomes the personification of the ideal of *doing* that is the road to redemption and resolution in the story. Anne is transformed into an agent in the simplest sense; she is determined to effect change and to accomplish her specific goal, which is to find the daughter who has been given up for lost. In response to astonishment at her plan – her neighbour wonders “What's come o'er the woman?” (210) – Anne still insists on carrying it through:

I must go and seek our Lizzie. I cannot rest here for thinking on her. Many's the time I've left thy father sleeping in bed, and stole to th' window, and looked and looked my heart out toward Manchester, till I thought I must just set out and tramp over moor and moss straight away till I got there, and then lift up every downcast face till I came to our Lizzie.... Oh speak not to me of stopping here, when she may be perishing for hunger. (211)

Seeing her son disapproves of her plan, she adds “Do not try and hinder me going to seek her, for it's no use” (212). Freed from her duty of faith in her husband's moral authority, and powered by the conviction that forgiveness and help are the best responses to Lizzie's sin, the once passive Miltonic wife quickly becomes all action, moving her boys to the city and spending her evenings out on the streets searching for her daughter, where

She used to wander out, at first as if without a purpose, till she rallied her thoughts, and brought all her energies to bear on the one point....She sometimes took a few minutes rest on the door-steps, and sometimes (very seldom) covered her face and cried; but she could not afford to lose time and chances in this way; while her eyes were blinded with tears, the lost one might pass by unseen. (214)

The work that Anne does in her search for Lizzie, work that is unpleasant, uncomfortable, depressing, and degrading, is work that, in Gaskell's version of the story, counts toward Lizzie's redemption. There is still a trial that needs to be gone through, but unlike the guilt and despair faced by the stereotypical fallen woman, Anne's active searching has a positive and hopeful goal.

In Manchester she has “more spirit in her countenance than she had had for months, because now she had hope; of a sad enough kind, to be sure, but still it was hope” (213). Anne’s battle to find her daughter contradicts the idea that Lizzie is permanently lost, and that the efforts of others cannot help her. Importantly, Anne’s desire to go out and do is not directed only toward Lizzie, for she also takes action on Will’s behalf. Anne’s newfound persona as decisive actor is thus shown to be effective in helping two of her children, so that her ability to help is acceptable outside of extreme emergencies. Will also needs Anne’s help. When Anne finds out that Will is in love with Susan but that he will not pursue the relationship because he is afraid that the pure and perfect Susan will not be able to bring herself to love the brother of a fallen woman, Anne decides to go to her directly and to explain the situation. She reasons that if Susan would reject Will on the grounds of Lizzie’s disgrace, he is “best without her” (220) and that in any case it is better to try than to simply give up. Anne has to put aside her own “timid feeling” (222), a remnant of former passive behaviour, to do so. In taking this action, Anne makes two discoveries. She finds that Susan loves Will and is not put off by the story of Lizzie, and also that the little girl that Susan calls her niece and cares for is actually Lizzie’s child, Nanny, who was thrust into Susan’s arms one night by the desperate mother. Thus, Anne gets to know her grandchild and sets events in motion so that she will eventually be reunited with her daughter. Anne, who begins the story in the most passive of roles, through her conviction that the tragedy of the fallen woman does not have to be the truth in the case of her daughter, through a critical recognition that her husband’s judgemental and merciless response to Lizzie’s fallenness is a wrong one, and through her freedom from his authority, transforms herself into an action-heroine who goes out and does, and keeps doing until she has resolved the situation.

In spite of the fact that he profits from his mother’s decision to fly in the face of expectation both in refusing to count Lizzie lost and in brazenly approaching Susan with the truth, Will Leigh continues to subscribe to the judgemental mindset that expects the fallen woman to be punished, even after his father has forgiven Lizzie and died. Thompson acutely notes that “Gaskell seldom commits herself to gender stereotypes, but the division between the sexes in this tale is startling. All of the men in the story are committed to the fiction of the fallen woman” (24). Hard to miss, too, is the decided lack of effective action on the part of the male

characters in story, a lack which is tied to their tendency to judge.⁷¹ Unlike Anne, who responds initially with sympathy and eventually with action, Will “sympathised with his father’s stern anger” (212) and responds with censure and a stubborn refusal to act. After James’s death, the role of censurer is left entirely to Will, who not only repeatedly attempts to convince his mother that Lizzie must be dead in order to keep her from seeking her daughter in the city, but in fact wishes that Lizzie *is* dead. He reluctantly agrees to accompany his mother to Manchester, but only because he cannot stop her going herself, and because he believes that Anne will not succeed. He warns that “At the end of the year you’ll come back, mother, and give over fretting for Lizzie, and think with me that she is dead – and, to my mind, that would be more comfort than to think of her living” (213). Will’s reason for undertaking the one action that he does in the story, then, is to prove to his mother that such action is pointless. Once he is in the city, Will supports his mother and brother by working as a blacksmith, his financial contribution seemingly tacit support of his mother’s quest. He justifies his agreement with the idea that in Manchester “Tom can have good schooling for awhile, which he’s always been craving for” (213), however, because he cannot admit to himself that his mother’s search for Lizzie is something he can support. It is partially Will’s money that allows Anne to do what she does, but because he possesses the same Miltonic male responsibility that his father did, he faces the same pressure. The idea of Tom’s education becomes a reasonable excuse to go to Manchester.

As a man with moral responsibilities, Will to an extent usurps God’s role, wanting to punish his sister for her fallenness. He envies Tom, who knows nothing of the pregnancy and actually believes that Lizzie is dead, “the tears he had shed over poor, pretty, innocent, dead Lizzie” (212) because in Will’s thinking Tom is untainted by Lizzie’s sin. Will himself “thought about her sometimes, ‘til he ground his teeth together, and could have struck her down in her shame” (212). He desires to personally inflict punishment not for the sin itself as much as for the shame he associates with it. But, Will has no desire to go out and find her so that he can inflict that punishment. When he falls in love with Susan, perhaps the situation in which he needs to be most brave, decisive, and active, he is paralysed by his own sense of pollution by association

⁷¹ In attributing these judgemental stances to her male working-class characters in the story, Gaskell in a sense makes them stand in for middle-class values and condemnation of sexual liberty. The strict moral principles that Will and James adhere to do not reflect those of the working class, who were in general less concerned with curbing extra-marital sexuality than were members of Gaskell’s own class. Motivated perhaps to show that there is no distinction between the classes, and that the working class can be moral too, Gaskell’s own biases about what such morality entails are apparent, and to an extent inhibit the progressive nature of her message. The distinctions that Gaskell makes between sympathy and judgment by gender are also ones that could be made by class.

with Lizzie, so that he would rather leave the city without declaring his love than risk rejection. Will feels himself and his family infected and ruined by Lizzie's sin and allows that to take away his ability and his right to act. His answer to the feelings he develops for Susan is to "withdraw from her sweet company" (217). He "resisted internal temptation, and stayed at home, and suffered, and sighed" (217), passively accepting what he has decided is his sad fate. Further to those sighs, Will's "increasing languor" and "restless irritability" (217) align him with a traditionally feminine passivity, one that in this case is shown to be unequivocally unhealthy. The absolute contrast between Will's and Anne's means of dealing with the situation, and the way in which Anne moves things toward resolution in spite of Will's attempts to block them suggests that Gaskell saw the re-evaluation and rescue of the fallen woman, perhaps on both the actual and the fictional levels, as the duty of womankind. Anne herself has now taken over as interpreter of God's will, insisting that Lizzie need not be punished and asking her son to believe the same thing. When Susan and Will finally discuss Lizzie, after Anne has determined that Susan is sympathetic and informed Will that she is, after Will has promised to forgive his sister because his mother has demanded it of him, and after Lizzie's child has died, Will still insists that Lizzie "deserved [her suffering] all; every jot" (237). Susan initially answers him with religious rhetoric, suggesting that it is God's place to make such judgments, but then interrupts herself to exclaim "Will Leigh! I have thought so well of you; don't go and make me think you cruel and hard" (238). The personal aspect of Will's judgemental stance is what is most upsetting to Susan, so she moves from moral theorising to the personal implications of his attitude, and makes him actually think about his sister as an individual, not simply about the stereotype of the fallen woman. It is this conversation, not his mother's demand, combined with the realization that Susan does love him but will not continue to love him unless he relents, that makes Will finally come around to the sympathetic, and up until his conversion, exclusively female point of view.

Susan Palmer is the shining example of purity and morality in the story, but instead of acting as a foil to the impure Lizzie, she is specifically identified with her, as well as with Anne in her focus on doing what needs to be done. This connection between the pure and the fallen woman is a challenge to the tradition that insists they must remain separate so as to prevent pollution, and it allows for ambiguity in ideals of female morality. Since Susan is not a member of the Leigh family, she represents the outside world that Will feels so ashamed in the face of,

yet she does not judge. Since she is female and therefore, in the world of this story, sympathetic, Susan's immediate reaction upon hearing Anne tell Lizzie's story is not judgment, but tears. Her next thought is to find some way of comforting Anne, which leads to the discovery that Nanny is Anne's granddaughter. Throughout the story Susan is an extremely active character. She is initially described to Anne as "just one to come quietly in, and do the very thing most wanted," and as "ready to hear and to help" (221). Susan goes out and works to support her drunkard father, and manages to rearrange her life in order to care for and support the illegitimate child who was abandoned in her arms, though it means she has to persuade her unsympathetic and selfish father to allow her to do so. When she learns Lizzie's story, Susan directs her energy into helping Anne find her lost daughter, despite her knowledge that finding Lizzie might mean her own loss of Nanny. Alongside her activity, Susan's position as the perfect, pure, morally infallible exemplary character in the story is made very evident throughout. Will describes her as "so good – she's downright holy" (220) and Anne says "She's as good and pure as the angels in heaven" (229). Susan is undoubtedly the story's paragon of purity and morality, but she is also akin to Lizzie. Morse argues that Gaskell's connection of the two aligns the pure and fallen woman morally, and that Will's anxiety "that Susan will feel polluted by association with him or with his fallen sister is belied by the text's association of the two women" (37). Not only does Susan take on Lizzie's role as mother to Nanny, but as Morse points out she eventually becomes another daughter to Anne through her marriage to Will (41). Homans similarly notices that in the aftermath of Nanny's death "there is general but not disturbing uncertainty as to who is daughter, who is mother, and of whom. Three mothers contemplate, in grief, the faces of two daughters" (231). Thus the three women – the fallen Lizzie, the pure Susan, and the good wife Anne – are shown to embody the same feelings. Morse suggests that in "identifying Susan with Lizzie, Gaskell implicitly defends the fallen woman's essential purity, blurring the figures of Pure and Fallen Woman" (41). The identification certainly suggests that the two figures are not separate categories, and that therefore the fallen woman has a right to be considered as something other than lost, ruined, and irretrievable. However, as the constant activity of both Anne and Susan makes clear, motherhood is not the only identifying factor. Agency – the focus on doing and the ability to get things done – importantly connects Susan and Anne, and finally, at the end of the story, connects Lizzie with them, as she takes up the mantle of active helper to those in need. All expectations of the fallen woman are challenged when she is shown to be

similar in any way to the pure. Susan is not Lizzie's foil, opposite, or judge, but rather her sympathizer, her surrogate, her helper, and finally her sister.

I have argued that in "Lizzie Leigh" Gaskell is firmly advocating a sympathetic and non-judgemental response to a woman's fall through Anne's active refusal to believe, as her husband and son do, that death is the only end for Lizzie, through her characterization of sympathy as proactive in contrast to a paralysed state of judgemental, defeated acceptance, and through her identification of the fallen Lizzie and the pure Susan. The fact that Lizzie's two-year-old daughter dies, however, would seem to suggest that despite what she says, Gaskell herself cannot put aside the idea that a fallen woman must be punished for her sin. In fact, she describes the child's corpse as "the little unconscious sacrifice whose early calling home had reclaimed her poor wandering mother" (240). Nanny's death has been the impetus for a variety of critical interpretations. Coral Lansbury suggests that the story "shows Dickens's hand guiding the plot at every turn and producing a sentimental and predictable conclusion" (52). Watt also dismisses the ending as conventional, observing that while Lizzie does not die, instead "she spends the rest of her life tucked away from the rest of society, dwelling on the child as the physical embodiment of her sin" (20) which is still harsh punishment. Bick argues that the ending of "Lizzie Leigh" is not as wholly progressive as that of *Ruth*, for while "Lizzie has escaped society's more extreme retributions, Gaskell emphasises that she continues to suffer" (21). Fitzwilliam finds it "depressing" and concludes that "Lizzie's re-entry into the family only occurs because the child, the living symbol of her sexuality, dies" (23), thus reaffirming the status quo in terms of both gender and class expectations. Morse reads the ending in a slightly more positive light, suggesting that "Perhaps Gaskell's vindication of the fallen woman, although it espoused full forgiveness, did not encompass full restoration in this world" but that nevertheless the story is "a subversive text that aligns all Victorian women against the narrative of the father" (42). While the death appears to be Gaskell's capitulation to the expectations of a readership that might respond to the idea of fallenness as Will and James do, it is also framed in a way that suggests the danger of those expectations. Nanny's death takes place while she is under the guardianship of a pure woman, and it is caused by the demands of an unsympathetic male figure. Thus, while it confirms to an extent the expectations of the fallen woman trajectory, it also vehemently critiques those expectations. The death occurs while Nanny is being cared for by the sinless Susan, and it is Susan's loss that moves the death out of the realm of unequivocal punishment.

Susan has done nothing to be punished for.⁷² When the doctor discovers that Lizzie, “the poor wretch, who lay on the floor in such extreme of misery” is the dead child’s mother, he demands “almost angrily” why she “did not take better care of her child?” (233). The doctor’s assumption and anger again suggest that the fallen woman deserves to be held responsible for her tragedy. Susan’s admission that it was she who left Nanny alone silences him. Since Susan was in charge, the death changes into an accident and not punishment. In fact, Gaskell takes great care to demonstrate that if the accident is the fault of anyone it is Mr. Palmer, who comes home late and too drunk to fend for himself, in spite of Susan’s care to have left everything prepared for him. When he calls for assistance it is only because she is “fearful of some accident from fire” (231) that Susan goes. The brunt of the responsibility for Nanny being left alone is put onto the shoulders of the useless and helpless Mr. Palmer, and taken off of Susan’s, because she is shown to have been her usual thoughtfully useful self. Later, Mr. Palmer, “ill-humoured from his last night’s intemperance, did not scruple to reproach [Susan] with being the cause of little Nanny’s death... he wounded her even more by his injudicious attempts at comfort; for he said it was as well the child was dead” (236). Morse suggests that Mr. Palmer epitomizes the harsh attitude taken by all the men in the story, and that “it is this hardness of heart that eventually kills little Nanny” (40). Homans also notices the similarities between the two fathers in the story and argues that “Nanny falls into the gap created by the conflict between the mother’s love for her daughter and her obligations to the father’s authority” (230). When one considers Gaskell’s association of utter helplessness with that masculine, judgemental, and unsympathetic stance, one can conclude with Morse and Homans that Nanny’s death is not simply punishment of Lizzie for her sin, but a recognition that the attitude is problematic. Further, Nanny’s death proves that the non-proactive position taken by the men in the story is not simply stagnant and potentially harmful to them, but also dangerous to others.

Reading Nanny’s death as the result of traditionally judgemental attitudes instead of as the punishment called for by those attitudes is complicated by Gaskell’s simultaneous presentation of the death as the means of Lizzie’s spiritual redemption, which suggests that she does have to endure punishment to atone for her sin. Thompson sees Anne’s motivation

⁷² The suffering of the pure woman over the death of the child who has been like her own makes her, at least temporarily, something of a martyr. When Nanny dies, Anne and Lizzie at least have each other for comfort, but “they neither of them took notice of Susan’s presence. That night, they lay in each other’s arms; but Susan slept on the ground beside them” (240). To an extent, Susan’s suffering is allayed with the birth of her own children, but this does not take away from her comfortless state here. In their martyrdom, then, Susan and Lizzie are also connected.

throughout the story as “the salvation of her daughter” and finds that “the incentive for the pursuit of this salvation is provided by Nanny’s death” (24). Anne comforts Lizzie with the thought that “thou shalt have [Nanny] again in heaven; I know thou’lt strive to get there, for thy little Nanny’s sake” (239) and at the end of the story Lizzie “prays always and ever for forgiveness – such forgiveness as may enable her to see her child once more” (241). Anne, meanwhile, is “quiet and happy” for she has back “something precious – as the lost piece of silver – found once more” (241). Homans argues that “though Anne and Lizzie’s happiness was originally ruined by paternal interference, it is now made possible only by the same interference, since Nanny’s death... was necessary to bring mother and daughter together again” (232). She suggests that the women’s happiness “depends, then ... emphatically on the situation of that love as something that has been excluded and damaged” (232). Nanny’s death is the means by which Lizzie is saved for Anne. While Anne is content at the end of the story, though, and while she has foiled the expectations of the fallen woman tradition and gotten her daughter back, the final image in the story is of Lizzie bitterly weeping. However, unlike the stereotypical fallen woman, she is not hopeless. Through the tragedy of the child’s death, which leads to her reunion with her own mother, Lizzie has hope restored. Beyond the motivation of the characters in the story, too, the death of the child gives the reader reason to believe in Lizzie’s ultimate salvation, and importantly to wish for it. While Gaskell’s situating of Lizzie’s final redemption in heaven, instead of reintegrating her and her child into society, may be frustrating or depressing, especially to modern readers, it is nonetheless a departure from the traditional trajectory. At the end of the story Lizzie is listening for “every sound of sorrow in the whole upland... every call of suffering or sickness for help” and thus “many hearts bless Lizzie Leigh” (241). That Lizzie’s redemption is going to come about because of her own sympathy toward others is evident, and again emphasises the value of sympathetic action in the story. This too is a challenge to the lost fallen woman, for not only is she found, she is shown to be useful to others and blessed for it. Lizzie does suffer at the end of the story, and the loss of her child is clearly figured as a sacrifice, but it is a sacrifice that allows her to become as useful as her own mother, and causes readers to regret the sacrifice. The depiction of the fallen woman as ultimately doing good in a practical manner, after being found because of the determined actions of two other women, suggests not only redemption, but reclamation. At the end of the story it is Lizzie, not Anne or Susan, who is the personification of the active sympathy that Gaskell has emphasised throughout as necessary.

“Lizzie Leigh” is challenging in its insistence on the redeemability of the fallen woman and the value she can still have to her community, and in *Ruth* Gaskell expands upon those ideas and complicates them. In *Ruth* the gap between agency and passivity is enhanced by Gaskell’s queries of what it means to be male or female, through the device of characters who do not conform to stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. The theme of care is also expanded, as Gaskell uses Ruth’s position to call into question other characters’ motivations for and means of caring, and as Ruth herself becomes a professional carer as she takes on a nursing career. Throughout, as in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* the importance of selfless commitment to the individual, instead of generalised concepts of charity or benevolence, is key. This ability to see beyond the abstract to care for the individual is one that is possessed, not unexpectedly, by the female characters in *Ruth*. Care for individuals is necessarily interconnected with how one understands and invests oneself in fiction and specific fictions in the novel, especially that of the downward trajectory of the fallen woman. As in “Lizzie Leigh,” the helplessness of her state is denied by some of the characters in *Ruth*, but because of her pregnancy a fiction is invented which creates a new identity for her as a respectable widow. Men and women react to the re-telling of Ruth’s past differently, women quite easily accepting it as the practical and logical, and harmless, way to improve Ruth’s situation, while men consider the immediate benefits to the individual difficult to reconcile with the greater principle of “truth” that is being disregarded. More so than in “Lizzie Leigh,” in *Ruth* Gaskell considers why women have more freedom to invest themselves wholeheartedly in individuals rather than abstracts, suggesting through the sympathetic Mr. Benson that challenges to authority are more difficult to make from a position within that authority, and through Mr. Bradshaw and Mr. Bellingham just how much can be invested in official versions of stories. Gaskell shows just how powerful fictions are and how it is easier, in some ways, to subvert them from positions of less official power. She extends her exploration of stereotyped fictions of women’s lives from that of the fallen woman to the traditional romance plot, suggesting alternatives to marriage through the characters of Sally and Faith Benson, through Ruth’s nursing career, and through Jemima Bradshaw’s complicated courtship. The metafictional nature of *Ruth* and the way in which Gaskell uses her new story to interact with and question conventional fictional trajectories has been the subject of a few critical readings. Hilary Schor notices that *Ruth* “speaks self-consciously about the uses of fiction to transform social wrongs” and that it is also “a novel with a literary self-consciousness and a

literary rebelliousness” (46). Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund argue that Gaskell’s experimental form in *Cranford* is “a more free-form and congenial literary mode in which that same outcast figure [the fallen woman] becomes a reluctant agent for renewal” (70), and that it is Gaskell’s continued telling of the story she begins in *Ruth*, which is constricted by its more conventional form. Most recently, Audrey Jaffe expands on that same connection, finding “a departure from conventional narrative form... accompanied by a concern with the detachment of characters, especially female characters, from dominant cultural narratives, especially those in which women play out their conventional role as economically and socially subservient to men” (47). The ways in which sympathy, philanthropy, and care figure in the novel too have been the subject of critical interpretation, most thoroughly in Pamela Parker’s reading in which she describes the community established in *Ruth* as a “gift economy” (59) where “true benevolence and reform are found... in the expenditures of self which redeem individuals even as they benefit and obligate the community” (67). My reading follows the idea that Gaskell sees her novel as a reinvention of the fiction of the fallen woman, but extends it to show how that fiction is complicated by other fictions, particularly the traditional romance ending, and by factors of gender, authority, and by the concepts of care and sympathy themselves. Thus I differ from others in reading Ruth’s death at the end as Gaskell’s response to the traditional marriage plot, rather than that of the fallen woman. Ruth dies not as punishment or repentance for her fall, but as a reaction to the ideology that says it is her role to passively reflect her lover’s image of her, instead of to be the useful and active agent of care that she has by the end become.

As in “Lizzie Leigh,” Gaskell highlights women’s agency in *Ruth* by juxtaposing it with men’s powerlessness and unwillingness to help that proves to be dangerous to other people. In *Ruth* the suggestion that male characters are not going to be effective comes early, as the reader learns about Ruth’s father, who is too distraught by his wife’s death to carry on for his daughter, and dies, leaving his finances in a mess and his daughter to the care of someone who does not know her. Ruth’s guardian, too, though he means well and is “a sensible, hard-headed man of the world; having a fair proportion of conscience, as consciences go” (35), simply executes his responsibility in the most expedient manner, and thus does a bad job of it, placing Ruth in harm’s way at Mrs. Mason’s, where production is more important than care. Both of these men, in different ways, abdicate the responsibility that they, specifically since they are men, traditionally have to take care of women. With Bellingham and Bradshaw, Gaskell further explores the failure

of men to effectively fill the role of protector, showing how it is in fact against their interests to sympathize with the fallen woman. In doing this, she also shows how sympathy and care can be manipulated to serve purposes other than to help a person in need, as Bellingham uses Ruth's pity to seduce her and Bradshaw uses charity for his own self-aggrandisement. In the feminized Rev. Thurstan Benson, however, Gaskell creates a character that allows her to suggest that judgment and passivity practiced by characters like James and Will Leigh and by Bellingham and Bradshaw are not essentially male characteristics and that rather it is the pressures of the social position of authority that men are put in that is the cause. Through her male characters in *Ruth* Gaskell shows that authority limits personal or individual agency, and that sympathy can be an attribute of real manliness.

Mr. Bellingham, Ruth's seducer and one of the villains of the novel, embodies selfishness and irresponsibility to the point that he endangers Ruth's reputation and life. Parker argues that the relationship between Bellingham and Ruth is based on an antiquated feudal system of service, where Bellingham should play the role of patron, but instead, "on both a literal and figurative level, [he] fails to uphold the duties of paternal benevolence" (57). In my reading, this failure of Bellingham's as a patron is symptomatic of his larger failings as a man. He first attracts Ruth's interest when he presents her with a flower in thanks for mending the dress of his less than polite dancing partner, and continues to rise in her esteem as he gives her the opportunity to walk outside of the city, thus returning her to the natural world that she loves, and suggesting an apparent sensitivity to her own situation and desires.⁷³ Ruth is also given the impression that Bellingham sincerely cares about people who are less fortunate than himself. Watching Bellingham depart from the ball and pass by "one or two houseless beggars [who] sat on doorsteps... shivering" (18), Ruth "fancied that Mr. Bellingham looked as if he could understand the feelings of those removed from him by circumstance and station. He drew up the window of his carriage, it is true, with a shudder" (18). Her false notion of his sympathy – for the reader can see the difference between Ruth's fancy and the truth that the narrator points to in the nature of

⁷³ Throughout the work Ruth is continually identified and identifies herself with the natural world, and so the decision to confine her within the city is shown to be a large part of the cause of her fall. Bellingham is able to spend time with her by persuading her to walk with him in the country, where she forgets "all doubt and awkwardness" (36). When she feels unidentifiable twinges of guilt, she reasons that she "can thank God for the happiness I have had in this charming spring walk, which dear mamma used to say was a sign that pleasures were innocent and good for us" (37). Schor discusses Ruth's affinity with the natural world as a specific response to masculine Romanticism and the way it depicts fallenness (45-79).

that shudder – is what initially leads Ruth to place her trust in Bellingham. He further manipulates her own sense of sympathy and responsibility by appealing to her pity. In order to get her acquiescence to his idea that she go to London with him, he reproaches her with accusations of her lack of care and sympathy for him: “Your sorrow is absolute pain to me; but it is worse to feel how indifferent you are – how little you care about our separation.... ‘Oh, Ruth!’ said he, vehemently, ‘do you love me at all?’” (50). By turning the focus to his own exaggerated emotional pain at her hesitancy to go with him, Bellingham makes Ruth responsible for his happiness. She cannot resist his entreaties because it appears that sympathy, pity, care and love dictate that it is the right thing to do. Bellingham’s actions after the seduction has taken place prove that the flaws in his conception of care, love, and responsibility are significant. When they are in Wales and Bellingham is out of sorts because the weather is bad, Ruth feels guilty for her lack of means to entertain him, thinking “it must be dull for a man accustomed to all kinds of active employments to be shut up in the house” (57) and feeling “relief” when he dismisses her, “for if he were dull without her, she should not feel responsible, and unhappy with her own stupidity” (58). Having come to know Bellingham better, even Ruth is beginning to recognize the difference between real calls for sympathy and false ones. Bellingham’s actions and emotions are neither traditionally masculine, in that he is weak, nor manly on Gaskell’s terms, in that what is presented as feminine in his character leads to selfishness, not to sympathy.

The real weakness that exists in Bellingham’s character in spite of his advantages of health, wealth, and gender, culminates in the way he deals with his sickness and with his responsibility toward Ruth. The narrator comments that if “Mr. Bellingham did not get rapidly well, it was more owing to the morbid querulous fancy attendant on great weakness than from any unfavorable medical symptom” (75). The great weakness here refers to more than Bellingham’s physical state as a result of the fever; it is also an intrinsic part of his character and the suggestion is that someone stronger could overcome those selfish and unhealthy tendencies. Worse, Bellingham uses his illness to excuse himself from his duty to Ruth, for when his mother shows up he decides that the affair cannot continue. He finds his position “troublesome” and an “annoyance” and decides that is too much for him to deal with until “he grew stronger” (76) which he does in body, but not in character. When his mother presses the issue, Bellingham does not act but rather wishes “in the languid way in which he wished and felt everything not immediately related to his daily comfort, that he had never seen her. It was a most awkward,

most unfortunate affair” (76). In this passive way, Bellingham detaches himself from the event and from the responsibility. When he does begin to feel somewhat guilty, recognizing that “I can hardly avoid blaming myself in the matter” (77), his mother is there to reinforce the deferral of responsibility: “Don’t be too severe in your self-reproaches while you are so feeble, dear Henry; it is right to repent, but I have no doubt in my own mind she led you wrong with her artifices” (77). What Bellingham feels as he abandons Ruth is a sense of “uneasiness” and an awareness “that he was not behaving as he should do, to Ruth, though the really right never entered his head” (78). In spite of his mother’s influence on his actions, Bellingham does understand that Mrs. Bellingham’s insistence that she will “do the thing handsomely” (78), which means that she leaves Ruth fifty pounds and a letter advising that she “enter some penitentiary” (78) in order to repent, is not the best that he can do. However, he overcomes his twinges of uneasiness by distancing his person from the problem, by comforting himself with the idea that money is an appropriate means of reparation, and by rearranging his emotional response so that he feels sorry for himself instead of Ruth, the real victim. When he is reminded of Ruth again upon encountering her disguised as Mrs. Denbigh, “for the first time for several years, he wondered what had become of her; though, of course, there was but one thing that could have happened, and perhaps it was as well he did not know her end, for most likely it would have made him very uncomfortable” (229). Further distanced in time from his abandonment of Ruth, Bellingham can admit to himself that in spite of his mother’s money, the position that he left Ruth in is one that the convention says leads to ruin. He is close to being self-congratulatory on his successful escape from any actual knowledge of what happened to her because it means he does not have to feel guilty. Bellingham is aware of and believes in the tragedy of the fallen woman in a general sense, but even though he personally is the cause of an individual woman’s fall, he is unable to care about her or sympathize with her as an individual person. Thus when he wonders about the fate he left “poor Ruth” (229) to, he has changed the woman that he once loved into an example of a type of pitiable or helpless case for which he holds no individual responsibility. Like James and Will Leigh, Bellingham cannot see the individual, only the idea of the fallen woman. Bellingham, then, causes Ruth’s fall through his own selfishness and disregard for the situation he is creating, uses her own untutored sensitiveness to the needs of others to get what he wants from her, and then shirks his responsibility by convincing himself that money instead of care is an effective answer, and finally forgets the individual Ruth in lumping her in with a stereotype. It

is Bellingham's logic and manipulation of the concepts of care and responsibility that make him a particularly sinister villain, because he is able to convolute his own actions and motivations to the point where he cannot comprehend the evil he has committed. As well as providing the means of Ruth's sexual fall in terms of the plot, then, Bellingham exemplifies very unmanly irresponsible attitudes toward individuals and how they are rationalized.

Mr. Bradshaw, though not as overtly perhaps as is Bellingham, is the other villain of the novel. Unlike Bellingham, however, he reforms through learning to truly care on an individual level, for real people. To begin with, Bradshaw is in many ways worse than Bellingham, as he uses concepts of care and generosity and charity to allow himself to feel self-righteous and to pass dangerous judgments. Critics have noted how Bradshaw's motives behind his charitable acts are selfish, though he wants the acts to convey selflessness. Deciding to present Ruth with a new gown because he is pleased with her influence over his daughter and because he "did not believe she had a silk gown, poor creature!" (193), Mr. Bradshaw is motivated not only by what he perceives as Ruth's need, but also by his own ego: "he had no doubt she would like to have it remarked, and, perhaps, would not object to tell people it was a present from Mr. Bradshaw – a token of his approbation. He smiled a little to himself as he thought of this additional pleasure to Ruth" (194). Parker sees this as "yet another example [of] the vestiges of paternalism" (61) as Bradshaw's gift is meant to indebt Ruth to him. At the same time, Bradshaw's is "a fantasy of paternal generosity" (62) because his real concern is always only himself. Bradshaw's smile is for his own pleasure in having people admire his generosity, which is not really generosity because it is self-interested. When Ruth returns the gown, Bradshaw's daughter Jemima, who is suspicious of Ruth's character and motives at this point, is "thankful and glad" (197) to see it, and it is one of the things that confirms her faith in Ruth's real strength of character. If the reader is, with Jemima, to applaud Ruth's refusal, then surely we are to condemn quite seriously Bradshaw's offer in the first place. Bradshaw's gifts to Ruth and the Bensons and even his own family are shown to be no better than the bribes that he offers to get his candidate elected. Both acts of giving are selfishly motivated with no thought or care attached. Bradshaw's smug self-righteousness in giving causes Ruth to be made uncomfortable, but in the matter of Ruth's past sexual indiscretion and then of his own son Richard's financial indiscretion, his attitudes cause downright pain and suffering. Upon finding out that Ruth is not an innocent widow but rather a fallen woman, Bradshaw upbraids her for her sins of sexual indiscretion and deceit. He abruptly

stops calling Ruth by name and instead begins to refer to her as “that woman” (278), and he identifies her son Leonard for the first time with the label “bastard” (279, 280). Leonard, who up until this point has been a friend and pet to Bradshaw’s youngest daughters, is turned into simply a proof of Ruth’s mistake, the “very child and heir of shame” (279), according to Bradshaw. By refusing to use their proper names, Bradshaw rhetorically changes Ruth and Leonard from individual people that he knows into stereotypes. Bradshaw attempts a similar translation when his son Richard is caught defrauding his clients, as he repeatedly claims that “he is no longer as my son to me.... He is as a stranger to me” (331). As Ruth becomes “that woman” in Bradshaw’s perception and representation, so he begins to call Richard “that boy” (331, 332). He is not as successful in distancing himself from his own son, being unable to banish the name entirely from the conversation because he is unable to convince Mr. Benson to join him in forgetting Richard the son and neighbor in order to prosecute Richard the criminal.

Bradshaw’s strategy of distancing himself through language and labels is emphasized as Gaskell draws a contrast between him and his wife. Mrs. Bradshaw, who otherwise plays but a secondary role in the novel, asserts herself at this point. Like Anne Leigh, she overcomes the restrictions of obedient wifedom for the sake of her child:

I have been a good wife till now. I know I have. I have done all he bid me, ever since we were married. But now I will speak my mind, and say to everybody how cruel he is – how hard to his own flesh and blood! If he puts poor Dick in prison, I will go too. If I’m to choose between my husband and my son, I choose my son; for he will have no friends unless I am with him. (334)

Mrs. Bradshaw not only identifies Richard as her son, as well as by his familiar, affectionate nickname, but also ties him to his father in terms of physicality – Dick is Bradshaw’s “flesh and blood.” The reminder of the genetic relationship that cannot be denied by Bradshaw’s rhetorical disownment serves to reinforce, as Mrs. Bradshaw insists, just how cruel Bradshaw’s attempt to replace the specific individual Richard with “that boy,” a criminal forger, is. Jeanette Shumaker suggests that Richard’s crime is evidence of Bradshaw’s own fall, which takes place “because of his pride and ambition” (162) and that in coming to terms with it Bradshaw “sees that his lifelong sin of egotism is much more serious than Ruth’s brief fling” (162). What Gaskell emphasizes, though, is how Bradshaw learns to overcome his sins. That through coming to realize and reconcile his son as capable of crime and reform, through the examples of care and

sympathy set by others,⁷⁴ Bradshaw comes to understand people as individuals and not simply as labels is made evident in the closing scene of the novel. Bradshaw encounters Leonard crying at Ruth's graveside when he goes there to see about buying a tombstone to "testify his respect" (374) for her. Bradshaw chooses comforting the child as a more pressing duty than the tombstone, saying "Come, come! my boy!.... Let me take you home, my poor fellow. Come, my lad, come!" (374). Bradshaw's acceptance of responsibility for his personal relationship with Leonard is evidenced by his use of the possessive "my," and his understanding that caring for her child is a far greater proof of his respect for Ruth than any expensive tombstone. This embracing of personal relationships and offering of genuine sympathy based on individual requirement is juxtaposed with Bellingham's continued misunderstanding of care. Instead of offering any relationship to his son,⁷⁵ he still only offers money and still does not comprehend that true generosity and care demands full and active engagement with the individual whom one cares for. The men in *Ruth* play a similar role to that which they occupy in "Lizzie Leigh," but it is more fully developed so that the emphasis, while still being on a masculine inability to see past stereotypes and social fictions to recognize individuals, further shows how that tendency proceeds out of and is symptomatic of selfishness and unwillingness to take on responsibility. Through her depiction of Bellingham's abandonment of Ruth, Gaskell demonstrates the justification of irresponsibility in action, while through the eventual conversion of Bradshaw she exemplifies how care needs to be related to individual people, and that individual men can come to recognize this.

The most important male character in the novel, however, is arguably the Reverend Benson, a man who both in his physically feminized – by being relatively weak – "deformed" (58) state, and his emotionally feminized – which Gaskell relates to his physical state, his role as a minister, and the fact that he lives with two strong-minded women – way of thinking, questions the gap between masculine abstracts and categories and female practicalities and individuals. Benson shows how masculine ways of thinking and the responsibilities of authority are constricting, and that there is a more significant kind of manliness in being strong enough to

⁷⁴ Benson, who is the actual financial victim of the fraud, insists on forgiving Richard for his crime.

⁷⁵ A particularly interesting aspect of *Ruth* is the way in which Gaskell creates anticipation that in the end Bellingham will reform and want to care for his son. Ruth herself at time fears that he will take Leonard away from her, and raise him irresponsibly. Thus there is a state of tension for the reader, who on the one hand wishes for Leonard to know the love of his only remaining parent – assuming that Bellingham can reform – and on the other wants him to remain with the Bensons and Sally, who have loved him all along.

resist the pressures of certain patriarchal institutions,⁷⁶ instead relying on personal responses and reactions. Especially in contrast with his sister, Benson is presented throughout the novel as feminine. Lansbury argues that the Benson home is “the antithesis of the traditional family” as it is presided over “by a brother and sister who have interchanged sex roles” (33). Parker agrees, noticing how Benson is frequently described in feminine and maternal terms (58). In the beginning, it is this femininity that allows him to feel true sympathy for Ruth and to communicate with her, which he has difficulty figuring out how to do. Something about him, “His pitiful look, or his words, reminded [Ruth] of the childish days when she knelt at her mother’s knee” (82) as he tries to speak to her shortly after her abandonment. In order to keep her from killing herself, he says, “In your mother’s name, whether she be dead or alive, I command you to stay here until I am able to speak to you” (85). Benson is thus associated with Ruth’s mother. To speak of her mother in the moment of Ruth’s crisis is not Benson’s first impulse, however, for he has “thought of every softening influence of religion which over his own disciplined heart had power, but put them aside as useless” (85). Benson recognizes that Ruth is different from himself and that he needs to seek what will affect her heart in order to be effectively convincing. He thus appeals not to the more abstract love and duty offered by his religion, but to the personal love and duty that he expects, correctly, she feels for her mother. He thinks of her rather than of himself. In his initial rescue of Ruth in the emergency of her suicidal impulse, when immediate action is required to prevent her from drowning herself, Benson is paradoxically able to act effectively because of his lack of masculine strength. He cannot physically keep up with Ruth to restrain her, instead falling and crying out in weakness and pain, which brings Ruth back to him. After he has her physically safe from self-destruction, at least temporarily, though, Benson begins to lean toward the Bellingham / Bradshaw tendency of lumping Ruth the individual into the category of fallen woman, but he is prevented from doing so by his incisive sympathy.

When it comes to the lie, which is Benson’s crucial action, Mitchell notices that in spite of the feminization of Benson “the sexual difference stands out” for he thinks “of abstract morality and himself” (37) and Anderson concludes that Benson’s character shows that “an overly reflective form of consciousness is in itself a version of fallenness” (136). While I agree

⁷⁶ One such institution is the Christian religion, and as a minister in a dissenting church Benson plays both an authoritative role and that of an outsider to the official authority of the Church of England. Gaskell’s interrogation of religion, gender, and power is discussed more specifically in chapter three in my analysis of *Sylvia’s Lovers*.

that Benson's tendency to focus on issues other than helping the person at hand, and especially to worry about the spiritual consequences of telling the lie to protect Ruth and Leonard, is made problematic in the novel, Benson's anxiety throughout about what is right and wrong both for Ruth and according to his own abstract principles of morality is in itself a way for Gaskell to demonstrate how harshly the strictures of society can affect those who attempt to challenge them, especially from the inside. Benson's position as a minister and the authority that comes with it make it particularly difficult for him to embrace the lie that allows for Ruth's acceptance, though his sympathy suggests it is the best thing to do. He is identified as a minister in a dissenting church, though not specifically a Unitarian one.⁷⁷ Still, his devotion to doing practical good on earth in negotiation with heavenly considerations, and his openness to sympathize with and offer help to Ruth suggest that his belief system echoes Gaskell's own. Because of his beliefs, though, Benson is never comfortable with the lie. The "deception grieved him, and yet he thought he saw its necessity" (123). In the face of his sister's embellishment of the story of Ruth's widowhood, he hopes "God will forgive us if we are doing wrong" (126) and begs her not to "add one unnecessary word that is not true" (126). When Ruth is offered the position of governess to Bradshaw's daughters, Benson feels he must reveal the truth because Bradshaw is about to "put her in a situation of trust about his children" (164). He has to be reminded that the Ruth he knows is the last person who would do harm to the girls, because he is thinking like Bradshaw of the stereotype of the contaminated fallen woman. He finally gives his less than whole-hearted approbation to the plan, but qualifies it by feeling "glad that it was so far arranged before I heard of it. My indecision about right and wrong – my perplexity as to how far we are to calculate consequences – grows upon me I fear" (166). It is because Benson is in a position of authority – hypothetical anyways, his practical authority is questionable – that he cannot as easily replace the societal view of Ruth as evil with his own knowledge of her as pure, good, and harmless as does Faith, because as a man he has more at stake.

Benson's fears are realized when Bradshaw discovers the truth and accuses him; however, he regrets only the lie, admitting that "my deceit was wrong and faithless" though the lie "seemed to open out a path of usefulness" (287) and that he is already punished by "the degradation I have suffered for years, at being a party to a deceit, even for a good end" (286).

⁷⁷ Gaskell's portrayal of characters from a variety of Christian sects, none of the specifically Unitarian, though often dissenting, suggests her interest in understanding the similarities as well as the differences between belief systems. The ways in which people practice their religions in Gaskell's work is one of the subjects of chapter three.

By virtue of his position as a minister certainly, but also as the ostensible head of his household, Benson is committed to the social contract that Bradshaw feels has been violated by his knowing and willing admittance of the fallen woman. Bradshaw attacks Benson for “daring to single me out, of all people, to be gulled and deceived, and pointed at through the town as the person who had taken an abandoned woman into his house to teach his daughters” (287). Benson’s complicity in the fiction of Ruth’s past is more dangerous than that of Sally or Faith or even Ruth herself precisely because he is by gender a member of the authoritative patriarchy that condemns the fallen woman as a rule. As a religious leader, he is a moral authority and as such has to negotiate a position not only for himself, but for his followers. Benson’s church is also financially dependent on Bradshaw, who considers patriarchal, moral, and spiritual authority to be the same thing. Thus Bradshaw’s ability to trust in the fabric of social codes is shaken much more completely than if Ruth’s actual past had been hidden from Benson too.

In Bradshaw’s eyes the deceit is an affront to himself because it is a departure from the myth of the fallen woman. In Benson’s eyes ultimately it is a sin, but only because it is sin to tell a lie, not because of the particular content of this lie. Brian Crick argues that *Ruth* is ultimately flawed because Gaskell “throws the weight of her authority too firmly behind the Rev. Benson’s absolute religious criteria, and their action [the lie] stands condemned” (104). The difficulty that Benson has with his own conscience once he has sacrificed his religious principles in order to go along with the lie, though, might as easily be taken as evidence for Gaskell’s approval of the lie as the only means in a world that expects the fallen woman to conform to a certain stereotype for a man like Benson to challenge it. Because he is a man in a position of authority he is weighed down more heavily with the challenge than the women are. Ironically, once the truth has been revealed, in spite of the unhappiness it brings, Benson recovers an aspect of his character which has been missing. He overcomes “a feminine morbidness of conscience” and becomes “simpler and more dignified than he had been for several years before, during which time he had been anxious and uncertain in his manner, and more given to thought than to action” (310). Significantly, this newfound manliness is described in terms that the women in the novel have exemplified all along. Faith Benson, for example, has an “excellent practical sense [which], perhaps, made her a more masculine character than her brother” (170). Practicality and action should be masculine traits, but they are inhibited by contemplation. By consciously reversing the Bensons’ gender traits and suggesting Thurstan’s femininity and Faith’s masculinity both as

useful and effective, Gaskell implies that ineffectiveness is not an essential aspect of either gender but rather that the masculine expectation of authority is what prevents men from being as practically helpful and valuable as women. Having the truth out relieves Benson's mind, but it does not alter the fact that he has told a lie. However, his recovered dignity, which is shown in action when he rejects Bellingham's offer of money with a sense of superiority of character and gusto worthy of Sally,⁷⁸ suggests that it has not hurt him. The anxiety that oppressed him rather was the result of the role that he was expected to play as the masculine judge of morality in general, and which he could not fulfill because his sympathies were involved on the side of feminine, individualized caring. With Benson, as with the male characters in the Industrial novels who are trapped by their economic responsibilities, Gaskell interrogates the difficulties of trying to reconcile absolute sympathy and faith in the practical good of the moment, with modes of thinking which are trained in more abstract responsibilities like truth and religion. Benson's painful consciousness of himself while he makes his sacrifices for the good of Ruth reflects Gaskell's awareness of the difficulty involved in exchanging one kind of inscribed moral duty for a more immediate and more valuable one.

With the exceptions of Mrs. Mason and Mrs. Bellingham, the female characters in *Ruth* possess a sympathy and ability to care on an individual level that is shown to be inherent or natural to them and which is related to immediacy and efficacy of practical action, in contrast to abstract or generalized ways of seeing the world.⁷⁹ In the main female characters, Faith Benson, Sally, and Jemima Bradshaw, as well as Ruth herself, true sympathy is intrinsic. In both Faith and Sally it is shown to overcome a surface layer of masculinized bravado or hardness, which is

⁷⁸ Sally, the Benson's faithful servant, is one of Ruth's most opinionated and impassioned supporters, and though her position changes as the story progresses, her vocal justifications of her convictions remain consistent. Further discussion of Sally's role follows on pages 93-96.

⁷⁹ These two women each participate in some way in the kinds of authority that are traditionally masculine. Mrs. Bellingham has a lot of money and the power that goes with it, and Mrs. Mason, while she is not rich, is involved in the world of commerce and exercises absolute control over her employees. This separates them from what Gaskell presents as the natural womanly feeling of sympathy and care. Though she is decidedly not a sympathetic character, even Mrs. Bellingham is more attuned than her son to the pain his abandonment will cause for Ruth. Her strategy is to purposefully ignore the situation, to remain "as blind to the whole affair as possible" (75). Similarly, Mrs. Mason is quite aware that her standards for the appearance of moral behavior among her workers and the actual care that she takes to keep them safe from harm do not match up, so her abrupt dismissal of Ruth for damaging the reputation of her business is proof not of her ignorance but of her hypocrisy. Bellingham cleverly capitalizes on the surface nature of Mrs. Mason's morality, convincing Ruth to miss church to walk with him in spite of her fears that Mrs. Mason will not approve by pointing out the folly of being "governed by Mrs. Mason's notions of right and wrong" (39). These two women intentionally deny the care and sympathy which is shown to be the natural lot of most of the women in the book, but even they seem to be aware of the necessity of it.

associated with false moral indignation and prudery. What defines Faith, though, is her ability to get things done: “Miss Benson had the power, which some people have, of carrying her wishes through to their fulfillment; her will was strong, her sense was excellent, and people yielded to her” (97). When Faith first learns about Ruth’s situation, she has two reactions. She whistles, which the narrator explains is one of her “masculine tricks” and a “useful vent for feelings” (94). Her more articulate reaction is to say “It would be better for her to die at once, I think” (95), which shocks her brother and does not seem to bode well for Ruth’s case in eliciting her sympathy. However, Faith’s harsh reaction is softened by the relationship that develops between herself and Ruth. Her veneer of cold distance in the case is broken as she takes control of the sickroom, where the “very dependence of one so helpless on her care inclined her heart towards her” (97), and with Ruth’s hand in her own she quiets her fears, calls her “my love,” and introduces herself as “a friend come to take care of you” (98). From then on it is Faith who is Ruth’s biggest practical advocate, and who thinks of taking her home, comes up with the widow disguise, and encourages her careers as governess and nurse. Having once made the decision to support Ruth, Faith voices no doubts as to the rightness of the lie nor about Ruth’s character and ability to be good and pure and religious. Faith’s only misgivings are about the baby, which she initially considers to be the “miserable offspring of sin” (101). In spite of Mr. Benson’s abstract arguments that the circumstances of its conception should not reflect on the child, Faith is “not convinced,” only “softened and bewildered” (103). By the time of Leonard’s birth Faith’s feelings are still conventional, though she keeps them from the rest of the household: “To Ruth, in spite of all that had come and gone, she was reconciled, – nay, more, she was deeply attached; but over the baby there hung a cloud of shame and disgrace. Poor little creature, her heart was closed against it – firmly, as she thought” (135). As soon as she meets the individual, and looks at and touches baby Leonard,⁸⁰ though, her prejudices are again blown apart, as the “baby-touch

⁸⁰ The sex of the illegitimate children in Gaskell’s works is interesting. Esther and Lizzie are both mothers to daughters, both of whom die as young girls. Ruth’s son Leonard, though he goes through a life-threatening illness, lives to become the protégé of another male character who turns out to be illegitimate as well. This appears to fit with the feeling of the period, which would suggest that there is less danger in a male being brought up by a fallen mother, because there is less concern about male promiscuity. If the female offspring of a fallen woman lives, as does Lady Deadlock’s illegitimate daughter Esther Summerson in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), she is shown to have not been exposed to her mother’s influence. Esther is brought up – not particularly happily – not knowing who her parents are. Lady Deadlock dies soon after she and Esther find each other, and though Esther ends up happily married with daughters of her own, she first suffers through smallpox, which erases her former beauty and thus her physical connection with her mother, as well as the potential that beauty has to lead to fallenness. Leonard’s sex suggests Gaskell’s concession to conventional feeling, and her own reservations about creating a fallen woman

called out her love; the doors of her heart were thrown open wide for the little infant to go in and take possession” (135). Where Benson’s religious theorizing could not, contact with individuals is enough to instantly break down walls of prejudice and judgment that turn out to be just another one of Faith Benson’s masculine tricks, like the whistling, to reveal her womanly heart and capacity to love.

Sally, the Bensons’ loyal servant, possesses an outward demeanor that is even more threatening than Faith’s, but which is similarly a façade under which lies a deep capacity for love, care, and sympathy. Sally’s reaction to the news of Ruth’s pregnancy, “Lord bless us and save us! – a baby in the house! Nay, then my time’s come, and I’ll pack up and begone. I never could abide them things. I’d sooner have rats in the house” (116), comes even before she is made aware of the fact that the baby in question will be illegitimate. However, Sally is one of Leonard’s strongest advocates after he is born. Sally’s bark proves repeatedly to be worse than her bite. Her relationship with Leonard is never affected by the circumstances of his birth, and, once she has officially been let in on the secret, Sally is not bothered by Ruth’s past nearly as much as she is if Ruth disrupts the household by being late for breakfast. What does worry Sally is the thought that her naïve master and mistress might be “put upon, or shame come near ‘em” (121). Like Faith’s, though, Sally’s answer is simply to ward off shame by making Ruth into a more believable version of a widow by cutting her hair and having her “sham decently in a widow’s cap” (121). Much has been made of Sally’s cropping of Ruth’s hair as a means of punishment for her sin,⁸¹ however, if Sally’s “merciless manner” and “relentless purpose” do suggest frustration, Sally’s perception of the possibility of Ruth’s taking in of the Bensons and the ignorant way in which they go about perpetuating the lie without consulting Sally herself, is the motive for punishment, not the sexual sin that Ruth has committed. When they do appeal to her with the truth, Sally pulls out her usual threat: “if I ha’ known who your visitor was, I’d ha’ packed my things.... As it’s done, I supposed I must stand by you, and help you through with it” (124). The claim is false, as Sally has just finished saying that she knew the true nature of the case all along. Sally cares less than anyone about the moral implications of Ruth’s or Leonard’s

redeemed enough to raise a pure girl child. On the other hand, though, Leonard’s sex can be read as a kind of hope for the future; he will be a man, like Benson, who sympathizes with the plight of the fallen woman.

⁸¹ Particularly interesting is Matus’s argument about the “folkloric and literary associations” of the scene, where the cutting of a young woman’s hair is a means of curbing her sexuality (118). Dickens’s account of the Urania College policy of uniform clothing for the women who live there and of the “suit of commonest apparel” (326) provided for them should they decide to leave, suggest a similar association of physical beauty and fancy or elaborate clothing with female sexuality.

pasts, as long as she is consulted on what had best be done. Like Faith's, her initial crustiness is only a surface, underneath which is a great store of sympathy and loyalty, as well as practical knowledge and means of taking care and doing good.

Faith and Sally embody the female capacity for sympathy and practical action, but Gaskell also uses them to interrogate ideas about stories and about fictional traditions, and to exemplify how stereotypes can be challenged by different kinds of stories. If the Bradshaws and the Bellinghams of the world, like Lizzie Leigh's father and brother, are dangerous because of their investment in and commitment to the stereotypical story of the downward trajectory of the fallen woman necessarily punished and ruined by her sin, the women in *Ruth* take the challenge to fictions of convention even further than does Anne Leigh. Where she denies that an early and disgraceful death has to be the end of the fallen woman's story, and changes the trajectory for her own daughter so that she ends up safe, home, and loved, Faith and Sally, and in other ways Jemima Bradshaw, query another traditional story of women's lives, in which resolution and fulfillment come from marriage and wifedom. Jaffe suggests that Faith's creation of Ruth's new fictional identity implies "a belief in the efficacy of fictions to paper over, if not overcome, ideological statements" (57). Certainly in the instance of the lie, but also beyond it, women use stories in *Ruth* to challenge the myths they are expected to live up to. It is initially Faith's suggestion that Ruth might be "passed off as a widow" (102), she supplies Ruth with a wedding ring and, encouraged by the interested response from her audience, "enlarged a little more than was necessary, and rounded off her invention with one or two imaginary details" (125).

Perceiving her brother's condemnation she defends herself:

I do think I've a talent for fiction, it is so pleasant to invent, and make the incidents dovetail together; and after all, if we are to tell a lie, we might as well do it thoroughly, or else it's of no use. A bungling lie would be worse than useless. And, Thurstan – it may be very wrong – but I believe – I am afraid I enjoy not being fettered by the truth" (126).

Benson is upset by his sister's appetite for storytelling, but Faith's side of the argument is not without its merit. She does not feel chastened or corrected by her brother, though that is often her response when they disagree, and though she concedes not to make up any more, she will not contradict or take back the false information she has already created because it serves a purpose, but also because it is "such a pretty, probable story" (126). The falsehood which "pains" (126) and causes stress and anxiety for Thurstan Benson, though he is not the author of it, causes no

such worry for Faith. She is devoted to it from the beginning, never has any doubts as to whether it is right, and thus wants to carry it out to the best of her abilities. The additional fact that she delights in her talent for its own sake, for the satisfaction she gets in making things fit together in a probable fashion suggests a commitment to the fiction instead of the individual. Unlike Bellingham's or Bradshaw's irresponsible use of the fallen woman trope, however, Faith's creation is a means to transcend it in a way that is specifically useful to Ruth. The idea is not surprising coming from Gaskell, considering her own use of fiction to investigate social problems and to convince people to act in the non-fictional world. Faith celebrates that individual healthy consequences of changing the story surrounding Ruth, and the fact that she is not punished for it nor feels any regret or guilt for her actions suggests that Gaskell does not mean for readers to understand Faith's action as morally wrong. It is simply a more useful fiction for Ruth's situation than that of the fallen woman. Where it is ambiguous for Benson, it is straightforward for Faith.

Similarly, Sally's tale of being proposed to after she is forty, and her refusal, is a hilarious but also serious challenge to the traditional romance plot that ends in marriage. Sally's tale is important to her – and interesting to Ruth – because she “may say I had a sweetheart” (138). However, as the proposal takes place with Sally very unromantically busy at work on the kitchen floor, unaware that Mr. Dixon is asking her to marry him, and refusing him “trying to look shame-faced as became the occasion, but for all that, feeling a twittering round my mouth that I were afeared might end in a laugh” (140), the romantic atmosphere of novelistic proposals is missing. Gaskell draws attention to the contrast between the typical romance and Sally's experience by Sally's own relation of romance and the mundane, uncomfortable, and humorous events of her own proposal. After she refuses Mr. Dixon, Sally imaginatively begins to equate her situation with one in an old song about lovers, and worries that “maybe he'd die for love of me” (142). When three weeks later she learns Dixon has married someone else her romantic trajectory is exploded, and “all on a sudden, he changed back again from a heart-broken young fellow... into a stout middle-aged man, ruddy-complexioned, with a wart on his left cheek like life!” (142). Sally's story works both to indicate the power of the romance myth in her desire to be proposed to and her mixing up the reality of Mr. Dixon with the events of the old song, and the imaginative or unreal nature of that ideal. The story still has value to Sally though, as it

presents an unexpected proof of her attractiveness and as a warning of the folly of putting too much stock in romantic ideals.

The ways in which Sally and Faith interact with traditional plots are reflected in Jemima's romance with Mr. Farquhar and her conscious struggle with having her emotions managed by patriarchal and capitalist interests. As Jemima rebels against her father's authority, at the same time she acquiesces to the traditions of romance. She is in love with Farquhar, but she is tortured by her belief that marrying him would be giving in to her father's plan for her future and feels "as if she would rather be bought openly, like an Oriental daughter, where no one is degraded in their own eyes by being parties to such a contract" (199). Jemima believes there is some "cold and calculating" plan in the works, where she is to be "transferred" and "accepted as a sort of stock in trade" (189) in a business deal between her father and Farquhar, who is after all his business partner. But, as affronted and insulted as she is by her perception, which is indeed an accurate one when it comes to her father's motives (179), she is most pained because Farquhar does not love her in the way that she expects of romance, nor does he pay her the kind of attention that she wants from him. Like Sally, Jemima is interested in the forms and traditions of romancing, and finds it difficult to look past the lack of traditional passion to see other expressions of love. She is upset by Farquhar's indifference (182) and "that he can't spare time for wooing" (185), and when she and Farquhar are finally beginning to be reconciled and to understand that each loves the other, "her very consciousness of the depth of her love made her afraid of giving way, and anxious to be wooed, that she might be reinstated in her self-esteem" (307). Jemima's convoluted emotions here amount to her desire to retain the power she has over him, hypothetically, by remaining coy. Gaskell is quick to disabuse Jemima and the reader of this fancy, though, as Farquhar is genuinely offended and Jemima, prompted by "some sudden impulse" (307), gives in. Thus, the headstrong and rebellious Jemima does fulfill the traditional marriage plot, and in precisely the manner that her overbearing and dictatorial father wishes her to. What seem to be Jemima's tendencies toward a progressive independent spirit are swallowed up in blushes and babies. Particularly disturbing is Farquhar's reaction to Jemima's claim that if he forbids her to see Ruth she will disobey: "The arm around her waist clasped her yet more fondly at the idea suggested by this speech, of the control which he should have the right to exercise over her actions at some future day" (307). Farquhar's vision of his rightful power over his future wife is softened somewhat by the truth in his next thought, which is to tease Jemima

that her love for him is “owing to the desire of having more freedom as a wife than as a daughter” (307) and the few subsequent images of their marriage suggest that that is the case. However, the resolution that Jemima finds in marriage appears to be that in order to love, a woman has to sacrifice herself to the role of the obedient wife. She also comes to understand, though, that love is something other than romance stories. The recompense is that Jemima is better off as a wife than as a daughter. The compromise that Jemima makes, overcoming her principles and her pride in order to make her family, Farquhar, and importantly herself, happy, is comparable to Benson’s sacrifice of his own moral comfort in telling the lie. In investing Jemima’s happiness in marriage, Gaskell values the traditional conventional ending and the status quo, but by showing just how painful and confusing the process is for Jemima, and suggesting that she does have to sacrifice, she makes the happy marriage ending ambiguous. Bradshaw’s plans for Jemima’s marriage are mercenary, and the connection she makes to Oriental daughters is a connection to prostitution, which is the ending of the fallen woman’s trajectory, not the happy wife’s. While Jemima’s marriage is sanctioned by law, church, and her father, it is thus still reflective of Ruth’s state. Gaskell’s conflation of the romance and fallen woman trajectories in Jemima’s rebellion and marriage suggests that she sees the similarities, but also that marriage, though imperfect, was still in her eyes a viable, if not the most viable, option for female happiness. Significantly it is the idealization of love and courtship that Jemima has to relinquish in order to find happiness in compromise and reality.

Though the actions and fictional trajectories of the supporting cast suggest the variety of lives that women can lead, Ruth herself is still the focus of the novel, and it is she who goes from passive victim to agent of health and benevolence over the course of the novel, in the meantime facing down her own obstacles of defeat, fear, and passion. Ruth’s extreme innocence at the beginning of the book has been repeatedly identified as Gaskell’s critique of the practice of keeping young women ignorant of the existence of sex and thus of sexual sin. Matus sums the idea up with the comment that *Ruth* “represents female unknowingness as productive of enormous vulnerability and dependency and shows how the innocence so prized in women is in fact another name for dangerous ignorance” (*Unstable Bodies* 115). Ruth knows no better than to believe Bellingham when he tells her what is right. She has intuitive moments when she feels something is wrong, but she has not got the knowledge to articulate it. The biggest danger that Gaskell attaches to this innocence is passivity, especially in the face of a natural instinct for what

is right. Gaskell does not show the actual scene of Ruth's seduction,⁸² but she does present Ruth's process in making the decision to go to London with Bellingham as the pivotal moment. Gaskell builds up the circumstances so that it appears that Ruth really has no other options. At the same time as she creates a feeling of despair for Ruth's future that makes Bellingham's offer seem reasonable and tempting, Gaskell suggests that even a slightly deeper understanding of the situation reveals other means for Ruth. The narrator says, "It seemed to the poor child as if Mrs. Mason's words were irrevocable" (49), suggesting that indeed they are not. In fact the reader knows, though Ruth does not, that Mrs. Mason's outburst has as much to do with her own "irritated state of temper" (48) as with Ruth's conduct, which she might be more willing to forgive at another time. Ruth's eyes are "so blinded by the fast-falling tears" (49) as her sense is blinded by her own false impression of her own helplessness, which is egged on by the opportunistic Bellingham. Once he has gone to fetch a carriage, and after Ruth has been refreshed physically by tea and bread brought to her by a girl with a "gentle, sympathizing voice" (52), the scent coming in through the window reminds Ruth of her mother's garden and that she does, after all, have friends close at hand in the couple who care for her parents' old farm and who will certainly care for her. Inspired thus to act, and recognizing that "it would be better to go to them, and ask their advice, at any rate" (52), Ruth is up, bonneted, and ready to depart, only she has no money to pay the landlord for her tea. Just as the sweet-briar scent evokes memories of her mother and inspires the hopeful plan, the "fumes of the tobacco" (53) coming from the landlord's pipe "brought back Ruth's sick headache. Her energy left her; she became stupid and languid, and incapable of spirited exertion; she modified her plan of action" (53) deciding to ask Bellingham to take her to her friends instead of making her own way there. Female influences spur Ruth on to action, while male ones block her way and return her to her passive state of dependence on Bellingham. Though she has written a note to Bellingham asking him to pay for her tea, passing by the physical obstacle of the landlord himself is beyond Ruth's powers and "appeared insuperable, and as awkward and fraught with inconvenience, as far more serious situations" (53). The fact that by his very presence – there is nothing to suggest that the

⁸² Critics find fault with this, because it serves to make Ruth's culpability ambiguous, although as Patsy Stoneman points out, Ruth's "relaxed behaviour in Wales leads us to assume that the crucially absent London scene is one of happy, though illicit, sex" (67). Gaskell was already worried that her book would be condemned, and more explicit dealing with the scene of the seduction would perhaps put her in an even more compromised position. Although certain fallen woman narratives do make clear whether or not the initial sexual encounter was forcible or not, – Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* for example is very clear that not only is Marian raped, but she is not conscious at the time – they do not describe the actual seduction.

landlord would not be happy to help Ruth if she explained her predicament – a man foils Ruth's attempt at agency, speaks to Gaskell's point. Even though her innocence / ignorance prevents her from knowing that Bellingham's designs upon her are sexual and that capitulating to his desires will ruin her in the eyes of the world, Ruth instinctively feels that the London plan is not in her best interests. What she cannot overcome is an overwhelming passivity in the face of perceived masculine influence which keeps her stupefied in the inn and then allows Bellingham to carry her off. Stymied by the landlord, Ruth tries again with Bellingham, asking him to take her back to her friends, but, since she is "little accustomed to oppose the wishes of anyone – obedient and docile by nature" (53), the reader knows that Ruth will "listen to [Bellingham's] reason" (53) once she is in his control. In the pivotal inn scene, Gaskell pits feminine and masculine forces against each other, ultimately showing how deference to masculine influence and embracing the traditionally feminine passive role is the cause of Ruth's downfall.

If Ruth falls through a failure of personal agency, she is redeemed by learning usefulness and helpfulness and to focus on doing instead of despairing, as well as to follow up on her instincts. She decides to return Bellingham's money because she has "a strong feeling against taking it" (106). Similarly, when Bradshaw sends her fabric for a new dress, she feels obligated by it and that "Mr. Bradshaw's giving me a present hurt me, instead of making me glad" (132). Ruth is no longer willing to put herself in situations where she is financially or emotionally under the power of men. She eventually becomes financially independent as she works as a governess and then seamstress and finally as a nurse. Gaskell's manipulations of Ruth's monetary concerns are important, as Ruth has to learn both how to accept financial help from people who genuinely care for her, like the Bensons, but also to make her own financial contributions to the family. Thus once Ruth has established herself as a nurse Gaskell does not neglect to mention the financial arrangement: "many sought her good offices who could well afford to pay for them. Whatever remuneration was offered to her, she took it simply, and without comment" (320). More importantly, though, Ruth learns to devote herself fully to her work. She wants to help in the Benson household, but the way that she goes about it in the beginning irritates and frustrates Sally, who launches into an "oration" (147) on the right way to do things, which is "to take a thing up heartily, if it is only making a bed" (146), while the wrong way is "to do it in a self-seeking spirit, which either leads us to neglect it to follow out some device of our own for our own ends, or to give up too much time and thought to it both before and after the doing" (147).

The result of Sally's lecture is that "henceforward Ruth nursed her boy with a vigor and cheerfulness that were reflected back from him; and the household work was no longer performed with a languid indifference, as if life and duty were distasteful" (147). Ruth has to learn that the work she does for the Bensons, small household things as well as the care of her son, are important. Just as one cannot simply throw money at a problem, call it charity and fulfill one's responsibility, one cannot simply go through the physical motions of a task and call it work. It is these traditional feminine duties of care and comfort performed with real investment of energy and self that she perfects and which make her so effective when she begins her duties as a nurse outside of her home.

Nursing is a particularly significant means by which Ruth proves herself, and in choosing to make Ruth a nurse, Gaskell is engaging with the contemporary emergence of the profession as a viable option for women to have a fulfilling career without sacrificing ideals of femininity. Female nurses gained real popularity and respect with Florence Nightingale's heroics during the Crimean war in 1854, the year after *Ruth* was published. That before Nightingale's success the occupation's acceptability for women, especially women above the lower class, was ambiguous, is evident in the difficulties Nightingale had in convincing her family to let her follow what she believed was a religious calling (Stark 9-11). It was, however, a growing field, and women were experimenting with the quasi-professionalization of nursing. Elizabeth Fry founded the Institute of Nursing in 1840, (van Drenth and de Haan 60) and several groups of untrained charitable nurses were established during the 1840s and 1850s (Bingham 25-26). Nightingale herself had visited a training facility for women nurses in Germany by 1850, and in 1853 became the director of the Institution for Sick Gentlewomen in London (Bingham 26). Gaskell met the Nightingale family in 1854 before the war, and expressed her admiration for Florence's work, feeling that her dedication to her patients along with her "perfect grace & lovely appearance" made her "like a saint" (*Letters* 306). It is this sort of saintliness that Gaskell associates with nursing in *Ruth*, where personal beauty and refinement along with patience and attention to detail and sympathy are feminine qualities that enhance her nursing skills.⁸³ The figure of the gentle or refined nurse was a politically important one. Harriet Martineau, who had read *Ruth* and found it

⁸³ Nightingale's position as a member of the middle class differentiates her from Ruth, a member of the working class who does make a living as a nurse. However, the innate or natural nobility that Gaskell ascribes to Ruth make her choice of a career about liberty and fulfillment as well as about money.

“sadly feeble and wrong” (qtd. in Uglow 341), wrote an article on nurses published in *The Daily Mail* in 1865, where she argues in essay form what Gaskell shows as example in Ruth’s fictional career. Martineau wants more women to take up the profession, declaring it “a mission for women, a vocation for them, honored, undisputed, and well-rewarded” (305). She argues that for “the hundreds of women who are eating the bitter bread of dependence” (307), to become nurses is “to emancipate themselves in a practical way which shall command unmingled respect ... and gratitude from the society in which they live” (307) which is precisely what Ruth does. The need for educated nurses and the desire that they be female is echoed in Abby Howland Woolsey’s account of the beginnings of professional nursing in England. Writing in 1876, Woolsey reports that “up to fifteen years ago,” (approximately 1861), most nurses “could neither read nor write; they were recruited from a low rank” (61). Woolsey notes the later attempts to “secure a better grade of woman” (80) and the difficulties finding them. Further, she documents the effectiveness of female nurses over their male counterparts. She quotes Dr. Edward Smith’s claim that in “gentleness, patience, cleanliness, tidiness, and general devotion [men] are far inferior to women” (91) and Dr. Henry W. Auckland’s similar sentiment that nursing is “a fit object for the employment of great practical ability and for the exercise of high moral qualities. It furnishes an outlet for the tender power and skill of good women of almost every class” (96). Having proved the superiority of female nurses through the authority of male doctors, Woolsey also points out that even “lunatic wards” are better controlled by women and that the “presence of women nurses in male wards is found to be much more effective in restraining outbursts of violence, abusive language, and offensive habits” (95). Nursing was an opportunity for women to have careers that were distinctly feminine but also valued and appreciated, partially for these feminine aspects that were seen to produce a more effective result than did masculine care. As a profession, nursing straddled the fence of proto-feminism. Gaskell’s choice of nurse for Ruth’s career also embraces that gap, celebrating feminine traits as the keys to a good nurse, but also pointing out the value of the independence and confidence it garners through money and through pride in the career itself.

Ruth truly comes into her own when she begins professionally nursing. As governess to the Bradshaw girls she is simply a filter to Mr. Bradshaw’s authority, her job being to make the girls’ obedience to his rules more palatable by showing them how being good and kind has rewards outside of the approval of their father. Even in the education of her own son Leonard,

Ruth is more a translator than an authority, as she eagerly learns all she can from Benson and his books, but for the express purpose of Leonard's improvement. As a nurse, though, Ruth is in her own natural element, exercising her own particular talents in the care and comfort of others. This capacity is evident in the beginning when she nurses Bellingham for the first time and pays such careful attention to the Doctor's orders that he feels "she is no common person" (68). While she is given the responsibility for Bellingham's care, before his mother and the professionals arrive, Ruth acquits herself well. She

put away every thought of the past or future; everything that could unfit her for the duties of the present. Exceeding love supplied the place of experience. She never left the room after the first day; she forced herself to eat, because his service needed her strength. She did not indulge in any tears, because the weeping she longed for would make her less able to attend upon him. She watched, and waited, and prayed: prayed with an utter forgetfulness of self, only with a consciousness that God was all powerful, and that he, whom she loved so much, needed the aid of the Mighty One. (68)

While Ruth has no nursing experience at this point, Gaskell is at pains to make abundantly clear that what she does have is selfless devotion to the needs of the patient. She eats in order to keep her physical strength to serve him, holds her emotions and tears in check so that they will not interfere with her work, and invests her spiritual energy in prayers for his health, with that "utter forgetfulness of self" that is the epitome of true care. Importantly, though the care here is selfless, it is still motivated by Ruth's previous relationship with Bellingham. That "exceeding love" that is the substitute for experience is not a general feeling that encompasses all of humanity but rather Ruth's specific feeling for Bellingham.

The case is very different closer to the end of the book, where Ruth cares for whoever is in need of her help because she is capable of giving that help. Responding to Jemima's objection that Ruth is too well-educated and gentle for the job, Ruth explains, "I like being about sick and helpless people; I always feel sorry for them" (318), and, moreover, that "At any rate it is work, and as such I am thankful for it.... perhaps you know too little of what my life has been – how set apart in idleness I have been – to sympathize with me fully" (319). Ruth's excitement at the prospect of work is not the pay, indeed she begins nursing only the poor who do not have the means to pay her at all, but the idea of the work itself, for finally she has something useful and important to do, something that appeals specifically to her likes and to her talents. In this way

she epitomizes the school of thought that suggests women's nature is to care, and she is a nurse in the original sense of the word – simply someone who nurtures. Ruth's need to feel that she is doing important work, on the other hand, suggests that she conceives of her nursing as a professional career, regardless of the monetary recompense. She is paid, too, if not always in money, in goods, deeds, and respect. In contrast to the way in which Bellingham rewarded her initial stint as his nurse by abandoning her, her patients now reward her care with their own love. Leonard is surprised and "overwhelmed to hear of the love and reverence with which the poor and outcast had surrounded her. It was irrepressible" (351-2). While she earns the love and respect of the community, and while her work helps to exonerate her from her shame in the eyes of some, it is motivated by her own desire to do something useful. Thus when someone suggests that Ruth is performing penance in working in the fever hospital, an old man who has had personal experience of Ruth's care defends her from the claim, which he takes as an insult: "Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work in penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus" (351). He goes on to relate how Ruth was with his wife at her deathbed, and closes with a threat: "I could fell you," the old man went on, lifting his shaking arm, 'for calling that woman a great sinner. The blessing of them who were ready to perish is upon her" (351). Ruth's work as a nurse is not her means to redemption, then, or penance for her sin, but rather it is proof of her pure, good, Christian nature that shows she is sin-free. Her goodness and self-sacrifice cannot be reconciled with sin.⁸⁴ Because she becomes a nurse for all the right reasons, a sense of duty and calling, and sympathy for each suffering individual based on his or her suffering, Ruth is re-accepted by her community. Ruth goes from innocent selfless devotion to one selfish individual who is the cause of her trouble, to a greater sense of work and duty that encompasses all who need her help, and for which she is rewarded by love and a sense of her own worth, usefulness, and purpose.

This would be a triumphant and glorious ending for the fallen woman as heroine. To the dismay of many critics and readers today as well as Gaskell's contemporaries Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning,⁸⁵ however, *Ruth* does not end with a woman finding respect

⁸⁴ Jemima's discovery of Ruth's past and her jealous watch for "one paltering with duty... one flickering shadow of untruth... the faintest speck of impurity" (278), which she does not find is also given as proof of Ruth's goodness in spite of her mistake. Jemima expects to feel "loathing disgust" but instead feels "full of pity, and the stirrings of new-awakened love, and most true respect" (278).

⁸⁵ Brontë, who read a "sketch" of Gaskell's intentions for *Ruth*, liked the plan but protested "why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?" (*Selected Letters* 202). Barrett Browning recommended *Ruth* to friends,

and fulfillment in her career as a nurse, but rather with Ruth's death, which, to add insult to injury, comes about because she feels impelled once again to nurse Bellingham in spite of the protestations of her friends and the frustrations of readers. Critics have much to say about the ending of *Ruth*. Arthur Pollard finds it an unconvincing "concession to the conventional point of view... at the cost of narrative credibility" (102), Crick suggests that Gaskell ceases to be fully imaginatively involved in the ending of *Ruth*, and thus falls into predictability (104), and Yoko Hatano argues that "Ruth must die in the end in order to conform to the domestic ideal of femininity associated with delicate fragility" (640), pointing out that the very strength and robustness required to survive illness would suggest something not "wholly angelic, pure, and feminine" (640), which is the image that Gaskell has been at pains to cultivate. Other critics suggest that by Ruth's death Gaskell does not capitulate to the convention of the fallen woman, but rather critiques that convention that calls for it. Schor argues that the "martyring of the heroine" is "a slap in the face of her readers, shocking readers out of complacency, to remind them of the excessively plotted lives women lead" (75) and that in fact it "has a harshness to it that suggests Gaskell's deeper hostility to Victorian mores and to the demands of polite readers" (75). Mitchell suggests more simply that "Ruth's death is clearly not a punishment, but rather a heroic expression of woman's most noble trait" (38), and Matus sees Gaskell's logic in having Ruth die as a result of contamination from Bellingham, finding the end "effective as a way of refocusing the issue of male responsibility" (*Unstable Bodies* 130). Parker reads Ruth's death as ambiguous, as "a romantic, anachronistic, and defiant act of 'ostentatious loss'" (67) that is difficult even for the characters in the story to interpret. Ruth's death is both the ultimate self-sacrifice, heroic in a book where selfless care is the epitome of virtue, but also apparently a sacrifice of the new fiction that a fallen woman can live a fulfilled and honorable life. The general consensus is that the ending seems out of place and contradictory to the rest of the novel. But, this is not the case if one recognizes Ruth's death as the result of her continued love for Bellingham and thus Gaskell's commentary on the romance myth.

Ruth dies because of her own investment in the romance plot, because she cannot forget her love for Bellingham or the idea that she should devote herself to his well-being and

calling it "a novel which I much admire" and "strong and healthy at once, teaching a moral frightfully wanted in English society" (*Letters* 140). She sent her compliments to Gaskell, but wondered "was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should *die*?" (qtd. in Uglow 340). Stacey Gottlieb, following Cora Kaplan (90), identifies *Ruth* as "a primary source for the Marian Erle subplot of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*" (57).

happiness. She refuses to marry him and finally refuses to love him, but only by dying. As Basch points out, Ruth's rejection of Bellingham's marriage proposal is the real "challenge to social conventions" in the novel, and it is here that Gaskell "asserts Ruth's moral superiority over both the father of her child and over her judges" (248). Ruth's refusal is not given its full due in critical evaluations, especially since it is related to the problem of the ending. Though less humorously told, it is much like Sally's refusal in that it rejects the conventional romance ending. The significant difference is that Ruth still loves Bellingham. Thus, she makes her ultimate personal sacrifice on the beach at Abermouth, not when she decides to risk her health and life to nurse him. That Ruth does still love Bellingham, although she attempts to deny it, is evident when he comes back into her life. In her mind she vacillates between condemning him for his cruelty to her and the passionate feelings she still has for him in spite of it. First she lays all the blame for the abandonment on his mother (224), then admits to herself that he is cruel (225), decides that "He has no love for his child, and I will have no love for him" (225), and ends up crying out in her pained confusion "Oh, my God! I do believe Leonard's father is a bad man, and yet, oh! pitiful God, I love him; I cannot forget – I cannot!" (225). Ruth knows Bellingham is not worthy of her love or of a relationship with his son, who she is afraid will be ruined by association with his sinful father,⁸⁶ but she still wants him to love her. When she goes to meet him on the beach to prevent him from interfering with Leonard's upbringing, her determination that "No cowardly dread of herself, or of others, should make her neglect aught that came to her in her child's name" (241) is proof in itself that she has passions that she dreads.⁸⁷ When she rejects Bellingham, then, saying, "I do not love you. I did once. Don't say I did not love you then; but I do not now. I could never love you again" (248), Ruth is lying. She gives up her love for Bellingham for the sake of Leonard, deciding "You shall have nothing to do with my boy, by my consent, much less by my agency" (249), at this point overcoming her passive relinquishment of her power to him. Once Bellingham is gone, though, she falls into a state similar to the one she experienced when she could not leave the inn, and again after Bellingham had left her in

⁸⁶ Ruth's worry is a reversal of the idea that the fallen woman is contaminated, as her "bastard" child is at risk of being exposed to a bad influence instead of being one. It makes absolute logical sense in this story, as Leonard is not about to contaminate anyone simply by virtue of his birth, while Bellingham has already proved that he is liable to do so.

⁸⁷ She also "craved greedily" the details of Leonard's first meeting with his father, which Faith sends in a letter as general gossip, not knowing who Mr. Donne really is. Ruth's wondering if "Leonard liked his new acquaintance? Were they likely to meet again?" (241) indicates the investment she still has in the idea of Bellingham as her lover and Leonard's father.

Wales: “She had no strength, no power of volition to move a finger. She could not think or remember. She was literally stunned” (250). In this state of “torpor” (250), she temporarily despairs: “Oh! if I had not spoken so angrily to him – the last things I said were so bitter – so reproachful! – and I shall never, never see him again!” (250). The idea that she has done wrong by hurting him puts Ruth back into this state of absolute non-agency. Her rational understanding that marrying Bellingham would be to betray herself as well as expose her precious son to his immoral influence is contrasted with her imaginative investment in the story of their former love.

Ruth is once able to resist the romance for the sake of her son. Bellingham’s sickness, though, breaks through her defenses, calling once again on her sympathy to bring her back to him. Ruth says, “I don’t think I should love him if he were well and happy – but you said he was ill – and alone – how can I help caring for him? – how can I help caring for him?” (361). Ruth’s natural instinct to care for the needy combines with her past relationship with Bellingham to compel her to go to him. As Bellingham regains consciousness after his illness, he murmurs, “Where are the water lilies? Where are the lilies in her hair?” (364). What the doctor takes to be delusional ramblings, Ruth and the reader know are not, and that Bellingham is thinking back to Wales, when he decked her out in lilies, with “the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy, and she did not think twice of his occupation” (64). The narrator comments on the early morning light in the room, asking if it is what “made Ruth’s cheek so deadly pale? Could that call out the wild entreaty of her look, as if imploring help against some cruel foe that held her fast, and was wrestling with her Spirit of Life?” (364). It is Bellingham’s words, of course, that have their effect on Ruth, reminding her of what she is in Bellingham’s eyes. His reference to the lilies suggests he still values only her beauty, not her commitment or talent or care. Ruth’s love for Bellingham is the cruel foe, and it causes the faint from which she never recovers her senses. To marry Bellingham would be to give in, and so death is Ruth’s first and final refusal to be selfless and to sacrifice who she has become to go back to being the toy with lilies in her hair. Stoneman argues that Ruth’s insanity and death are “the desperate results of the failure of that ‘redemptive’ process (based on ‘repentance’ which is really repression) to confront Ruth’s genuine dilemma, which is that she was led, while childishly irresponsible, into a sexual bond which she can neither forget nor responsibly continue” (75). She suggests Ruth’s death is thus “the novel’s unintended ideological impasse” (76) as Gaskell has no means by which to resolve Ruth’s sexual desire for Bellingham. It seems to me, however, that without reading repressed sexual desire into

it, *per se*, one can understand Ruth's love for Bellingham in spite of herself as her failure to fully transcend the romance narrative and the trap of feminine love. She remembers Bellingham as her lover, and the image she had of him then, and continues to love him because he loved her and because she believes he needs her. Ruth escapes the fallen woman narrative through her hard work and intrinsic goodness, and she once denies the romance narrative too, momentarily understanding that in spite of his happily-ever-after visions, in reality, Bellingham will not be a good husband or father. Listening to Sally tell her romance story, Ruth falls asleep and is described as "peaceful as death" (142). At the end of her own love story too, she is peaceful in death instead of forever entrapped in her love for Bellingham. If Ruth is punished for anything, it is falling again for the idea that Bellingham needs her and that she can save him. Where Jemima sacrifices her independence for love, Ruth dies instead of giving in to love. Ruth's death is a denial of the romance ending instead of capitulation to the fallen woman trajectory.

The ways in which Gaskell queries the importance of romance and the marriage ending through Sally's juxtaposition of romance with reality, Faith's belief in her own power to recreate reality through invention, and Jemima's resistance to and final ambiguous acceptance of the marriage as resolution support my reading of Ruth's death as further critique of the idea that a woman's absolute passive devotion to one man, for the sake of love, is a healthy means of fulfillment. In denying the traditional trajectory of the fallen woman, Gaskell needs to find another ending for Ruth. She does this by creating a fulfilling and valued career for her as a nurse, but, in bringing Bellingham back to be nursed by Ruth, Gaskell suggests that the feminine ideal of a woman's sacrifice to her beloved is dangerous and not easily overcome. The redeeming aspect of the death is that it is Gaskell's alternative to marriage to an uncaring and irresponsible man like Bellingham. Ruth cannot resist the call upon her sympathy, but she is ultimately able to resist Bellingham turning her back into the passive beautiful object of his romantic fantasy, if it is through death. What care and love and sympathy should really entail is therefore called into question once again, as Ruth's understanding of these things leads to her death. As intrinsic female characteristics they appear easily taken advantage of and abused by characters like Bellingham, who do not care on the same level. Even as she identifies instinctive care and its practical application with women, though, Gaskell's experiment with the ambiguity of gender in the Benson siblings and their reactions to Ruth's situation shows that it is not sex that matters, but the roles people are expected to play. Thus the generous and sincere sympathy

shown by women is not essentially female only, but it is blocked in the male characters by the very authority that should make them more free. The problem is not with feminine sympathy but with masculine inability to participate in it. Authority limits the agency to act according to one's real, immediate emotional responses. Blind obedience to that authority too, in Ruth's devotion to Bellingham, limits her ability to act for herself, causing her stupors and eventually her death. Love and care on an individual level are in the domain of women's work, because men are too committed to other misguided ways of understanding, through the claims of their authority and social responsibility. Gaskell's focus throughout on stories and fictions of women's lives and who buys into which ones, for what purpose, suggests the connection that she makes between power and fiction; a connection which is uneasy in its recognition that falsities or generalization can be made to effect so strongly individual lives, but that also recognizes the opportunity for counter-fictions which also can change individual lives for the better.

Ruth, then, is a novel that espouses anti-conservative ideals in its interrogation not only of the fiction of the fallen woman, but of the fiction of romance. If "Lizzie Leigh" is a straightforward condemnation of masculine judgemental attitudes toward the predicament of the fallen woman that posits women's physical action and agency as its answer, *Ruth* delves deeper into the motivations behind judgment and sympathy, authority and agency. Both works suggest Gaskell's belief in an inevitable difference between the sexes when it comes to selflessness and care, a difference that makes women more suited to care, and to care as a profession, which in turn suggests a way for them to move to a place of independence, economically speaking at least, from men. On the other hand, though, feminine romantic devotion combined with this selflessness is shown to have the potential to be disastrous, especially when selflessness is confused with passivity. Gaskell's thinking on the subject of the fallen women changes from her depiction of Esther, a sympathetic but stereotypical character, to "Lizzie Leigh" and *Ruth*, both of which examine and explode the stereotype itself, and do so by suggesting that action can and should be taken. In *Ruth*, finally, the consequences of selfless action and the similarities between fallen love and married love are examined. I do not mean to argue that Gaskell set out with the intention to write a novel that showed how the fiction of romance is like the fiction of the fallen woman in that it does not hold up in reality. Rather, in expanding on the theme of non-judgemental sympathy toward the fallen woman and the insistence that doom is not the only end for her that she takes up in "Lizzie Leigh," Gaskell discovers just how interconnected ideals of

female life trajectories are. Expanding the roles of men in the novel and how they interact with the fictions allows Gaskell to suggest not only that commitment to abstracts and judgment and punishment based on them are aberrations of true manliness, but that the very position of authority that men are put in because of their gender leads to the problem. As she emphasizes through Benson and Bradshaw, it is the pressure of expectations on men to sternly enforce rules and morals that prevents them from as easily devoting themselves to the care of the individual as women can. Thus, the Miltonic restrictions placed on women that “Lizzie Leigh” begins with, that they are to depend on men for moral guidance, actually free them to feel more acutely for, sympathize with, and act to help, people who are in need. Instead of critiquing judgementalism as an essential aspect of male nature, Gaskell considers its social manifestations. As the economic positions that men take in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* contribute to their ineffectiveness and lack of agency, so their social positions in *Ruth* and “Lizzie Leigh” inhibit the kind of natural sympathetic reaction that the women have. As we shall see in the next chapter, which deals specifically with the institutions of religion and faith and the ways in which Gaskell considers their role in limiting as well as expanding men’s and women’s agency, even spiritual authority, as it transcends social authority but also reinforces personal responsibility, is subjected to similar challenges.

Chapter Three

“I would love my God more, and thee less”: Religion, Marriage, and Agency in “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras,” *Sylvia’s Lovers*, and “Lois the Witch”

We have seen the incapacitating nature of religious authority evident in Gaskell’s clergymen Thurstan Benson in *Ruth* and Mr. Hale in *North and South*, as well as the Miltonic Christian ideal and challenge to it in “Lizzie Leigh.” The relationship between Christian faith, agency, and gender is one that Gaskell interrogates in different ways and to different degrees in many of her works, most effectively when she is coming at it not from the perspective of the clergy, but rather from that of lay people, which allows her to examine problems with religion on the level of personal belief and in terms of practical manifestations, outside of the more abstract context of theology. In this chapter I examine “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” (1847), *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863), and “Lois the Witch” (1859), each of which combines a conventional appreciation of the Christian values of selflessness, kindness, love, duty and work ethic with a querying of just where authority does and should rest within Christian faith and practice. The movement from an optimistic image of a woman’s right to claim her own spiritual responsibility and path to heaven in the earlier work and a pessimistic view of the limits of female agency when it comes to religion in the later two reflects Gaskell’s desire to maintain her faith and her belief in the utility of religion, as well as her recognition of the imbalances it could help create and perpetuate. Through the struggles with faith that her characters undergo in these three works, Gaskell raises issues regarding the biblical separation of the sexes in the spiritual roles men and women are expected to play, where women are to put their faith essentially in their husbands or fathers who should interpret the will of God for them. This disempowerment of women and what works out in these stories to be the mis-empowerment of men causes a confusion or misappropriation between religious feeling and action and secular desires. In “Libbie Marsh” and *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Gaskell approaches the relationships between gender, agency, and faith from the perspective of working-class characters. The distance between Gaskell’s own experience and that of these characters,⁸⁸ perhaps allows her more freedom to question and challenge religion in terms of gender roles than she might feel were she to take a more familiar middle-class perspective. In “Lois” the characters are middle class, but the situation is foreign, taking place

⁸⁸ The distance between class positions is echoed in the historical distance between the action of *Sylvia’s Lovers*, which takes place at the end of the eighteenth century, and 1863 when the book was published.

among Puritans in New England and allowing for a similar distance from Gaskell's own experience. In each of these narratives, Gaskell's anxieties about middle-class gender roles are displaced, yet the conclusions she reaches are pertinent to her own class position and her own faith. While Gaskell is usually careful not to make specific the religious denominations of her characters, her own Unitarian faith is important to the way in which she portrays different kinds of Christianity and to the relationship she finds between gender and religion. The tolerance and rationalism for which nineteenth-century Unitarianism is known is clearly present in all three stories, but the Unitarian influence is not simply about open-mindedness. Rather, Gaskell insists that specific theological belief systems are important because they affect personal agency and practice. Her focus on earthly duty as a means to heavenly redemption is also necessarily a focus on the rational and the practical aspects of faith. Religious beliefs and practices that stray too far from the checks and balances of particular kinds of institutionalised authority are shown not only to be dangerously irrational but also personally and even sexually motivated – perhaps the ultimate perversion of spiritual faith. On the other hand, though, control and authority too strictly depended on has consequences of its own, especially when it comes to the ways in which women are expected to practice their faith. These three works show Gaskell working through questions of authority, agency, and freedom when it comes to religion, and ultimately suggesting that the social conventions and economic realities surrounding marriage and wifehood place restrictions on women's spirituality. Their relationships with God are limited by their relationships with their husbands, and thus the choice to marry has consequences for faith.

The nature and practice of religion plays a significant role in much Victorian fiction, which is not surprising in an era that was undergoing a major crisis of faith as scientific and technological developments presented serious challenges to biblical beliefs, but that still insisted on the lessons of the Bible as the fundamental guide for morality, propriety, and societal values. Gaskell's position as the wife of a minister situates her firmly in the mainstream that viewed Christianity as the source and end of morality and proper behaviour. The fact that William Gaskell was a Unitarian minister, along with Elizabeth's own Unitarian background, however, adds a particular caveat to that position, one that melds the general principles of Christianity with a history of religious oppression, emphasises intellectual and rational engagement with doctrine (and challenges to that emphasis), and of course promotes great openness and tolerance. To understand, then, the significance of religion in Gaskell's fiction, an overview of what

Unitarianism was in the early and mid nineteenth century, how it was changing, and Gaskell's personal interactions with it and with other religions, is helpful. In general, critical consensus on the influence of Gaskell's Unitarianism on her fiction links her interest in social justice, as well as the diversity of faiths of her characters, with the Unitarian reputation for tolerance and progressive thinking. R.K. Webb, who was the first to focus on, and has the most to say on the topic of the Gaskells' faith, suggests that "Mrs. Gaskell was not a religious novelist, but her Unitarianism gave her a world view so inclusive and so prescriptive, that, when she set herself a social or moral task beyond mere tale-spinning, she was forced to be a philosophical novelist" ("The Gaskells" 168). John Chapple, writing most recently on the topic, agrees that "although Unitarianism as such is absent from her fiction, its humane perspectives are omnipresent" (165), confirming that it is the ideology of kindness that comes through in Gaskell's work, rather than strict ideas regarding theology or dogma. Mark Knight and Emma Mason also concur that "Gaskell's own views are betrayed most clearly when she elevates those who express a love of God beyond denominational boundaries" (78), but they do notice a bias toward Unitarian rationalism, suggesting that "Gaskell used the novel to promote an idea of faith that... valued reason and progress while recognising the importance of heartfelt devotion" (77). Valentine Cunningham insists that Gaskell's own denominational boundaries were not quite clear, in that in her novels at least, "Mrs. Gaskell feels most at home... in a rural or small-town Dissent, whose relaxed and generous world approximates closely to the Anglicanism of Cranford" (142). The overwhelming impression of Gaskell's faith as it comes through in her writing, then, is of openness and tolerance for various faiths and practices, and an emphasis on the values of kindness and rationality.

Very briefly, Unitarianism is a branch of Dissenting Protestantism which differs most significantly from the Church of England in that it denies the divinity of Christ and thus the concept of the Holy Trinity. Unitarians believe instead that Christ was a man whose teachings and martyrdom connect humanity to God by being the best example of what a man could be. Webb sums up the theology of Joseph Priestley, one of the founding fathers of English Unitarianism, as "a vast process of learning, a divinely ordained means by which men could work out their own salvation and help others to do so, to promote the ultimate, predetermined happiness of the human race" ("The Gaskells" 145). Thus, faith, reason, the authority of God, and man's ability to discover and improve himself and his world, are all compatible in the

Unitarian worldview. The focus on intellect and rationality, along with the ideal of self-improvement it espoused, made the faith one that was “firmly middle class” (Parsons 80), although, as Gerald Parsons argues, the political and cultural power amassed by Unitarians and their friends during the early and middle nineteenth century “gave Unitarianism an importance out of all proportion to its size” (80). It also attracted, for varying lengths of time, distinguished radical thinkers disillusioned with other forms of faith, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Stuart Mill. As members of a dissenting or non-conforming religion, Unitarians faced oppression until the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts in 1828, when religious tolerance began to take hold in England. Before this, they could not attend university or hold any political power. At the same time, Unitarianism was facing challenges to its Priestleyan roots in rationalism and necessarianism⁸⁹ from a new faction led by popular minister James Martineau,⁹⁰ who felt that emotional devotion and ritual, often opposed to straightforward rationality, were important aspects of spirituality as well. Unitarians were also involved in the birth of the feminist movement, as Katherine Gleadle makes clear in her book *The Early Feminists*. Her contention is that Unitarians “did not promote women purely in those areas where they might achieve like men, but were also keen to herald the particular contribution women might make to society.... They wished women to advance in society not purely on men’s terms, but hoped that the emancipation of women would form part of a wider cultural revolution, in which new values and priorities might triumph” (7). While Gleadle’s book mentions Gaskell, its focus is mostly on earlier Unitarian interest in the roles and rights of women. The specific relationship between gender and faith in Gaskell’s fiction has yet to be fully explored. By the mid nineteenth century, when Gaskell was writing, Unitarianism was itself involved in contradictions as a recently empowered faith that had long been oppressed, as a

⁸⁹ Webb’s brief and helpful synopsis of Priestleyan necessarianism defines it as the theological stance that “all action is done in obedience to motives” which are “determined ultimately by external impressions brought together by the law of association” (*Harriet Martineau* 80). Thus, “the whole of mental and moral life, being a function of matter, is similarly subject to natural laws” (*HM* 80), and nature, for Priestley, equals God. As Webb goes on to point out, there was a seemingly fine line between necessarianism and fatalism, but the “necessarian contention was that under their system, every man is the maker of his own fortune. His own actions and determinations are necessary links in the chain of causes and effects” (*HM* 83). The idea that people have to be responsible for the moral choices that they make is very important when considering Gaskell’s focus on agency.

⁹⁰ Martineau argues against restricting matters of religion to the rational, because “Our devout beliefs are not built as we suppose, upon the dry strands of reason, but ride upon the flood of our affections; safe and joyous, bounding over its waves, when its surface only plays with the sweet breeze of heaven; but engulfed, when it rages in the storm of passion, or fixed in stiff death, when its flow is stopped by the winter of an Arctic intellect” (91).

reason-based religion that struggled with its emotional side, and as self-determined Christianity that had to balance personal ambition with love and sympathy for others.

Elizabeth Gaskell brought her own particular Unitarian faith with her to her marriage. Her father, William Stevenson, spent a brief stint as a minister to a Unitarian congregation, but perhaps more influential was the strongly Unitarian faith of her mother's family, who brought her up (Chapple 166). Chapple, Cunningham, Knight and Mason, and Webb all suggest that Gaskell's Unitarian home life and Anglican school life during her childhood were influential to her beliefs as an adult, steering her closer to Martineau's interest in emotional religion than her husband's more traditional doctrine may have allowed him to go. Chapple suggests Elizabeth Gaskell's "early experience of Romantic poetry... made her receptive to this more emotional form of Unitarianism" (169),⁹¹ and Webb notes that she "admired that very devotional quality in the preaching of Frederick Denison Maurice, whatever reservations her husband (and probably herself) might have had about his message" (155). While they do not appear to have gotten along particularly well with Martineau personally – Elizabeth complains in a letter in 1853 that "All the James Martineaus come tomorrow... I wish they weren't coming. – I like to range about *ad libitum*, & sit out looking at views & c; not talking sense by the yard" (*Letters* 239) – the Gaskells both appear to have understood the attraction of ritualized or emotionally centered religion. William Gaskell's ideas have been identified as of the more traditional, Priestleyan line that valued reason. Webb notes that even at the end of his long career, "committed as [William] was to practical improvement and eager though he was to avoid discord and controversy, the Priestleyan verities ran like a ground bass through all he did and said" (152). On the other hand, Barbara Brill, author of the only book entirely dedicated to William, suggests that concerning "the new attitudes" advocated by Martineau, "William, by virtue of his reserved nature, played a more supportive role" (67), so just how far he was for or against the promotion of Unitarian devotionalism is not quite clear. His encouragement of his wife's authorial career and the inclusion of a hymn he wrote in Martineau's *Hymns for the Christian Church and Home* (1840),

⁹¹ Gaskell was particularly fond of the poetry of William Wordsworth, and her experience was perhaps not unlike J. S. Mill's, who claims in his *Autobiography* (1873) that in Wordsworth's poems he "seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind" (116). For Mill the emotional connection to humanity he finds in Wordsworth inspires him with reason to continue with the practical application of rational philosophy. The feeling-centered faith of Romantic poetry provides a perspective and perhaps comfort that the intellectually-focused Unitarian doctrine appeared to lack.

a book which “worked to stir the believer into a state of religious emotion” (Knight and Mason 72), though, suggest that William Gaskell too saw the value in appeals to spirituality through the means of the emotions. If the critical connection between Elizabeth Gaskell’s Anglican-influenced upbringing and her appreciation of a more aestheticised and emotional spirituality is correct, then perhaps the reasonable conclusion is that her way of thinking had some influence on her husband’s faith, instead of being in conflict with it.

One incident in particular in the Gaskell family, however, serves to indicate the limits of William’s tolerance, at least from his wife’s point of view, as well as her coming to terms with how significant denomination and doctrine are to her. While in Rome in 1862, twenty-seven-year-old Marianne considered converting⁹² to Catholicism, to the shock and apparent horror of her parents at home in Manchester. Elizabeth’s immediate reaction was “*extreme pain*” and she complained that “Marianne has all her life been influenced by people, *out of her own family*, – & seldom by the members of it... in all matters of opinion” (*Letters* 687).⁹³ The remedy to this problem was to set Marianne on a course of serious, and one assumes theological, reading with her father; however, Elizabeth expressed doubts about the potential of this plan, worrying that “his *extreme* dislike and abhorrence of R. C-ism; – & thinking all the arguments adduced by its professors ‘utterly absurd,’ makes *her* more inclined to take up its defence thinking it unjustly treated” (687). Her interpretation of William’s perhaps unreasonable response to all things Catholic suggests that while Elizabeth did not want her daughter to become one, she at least perceived that a more tolerant approach would more effectively win her daughter back. In a calmer state of mind, she wrote to Norton of the effect of Marianne’s reading, which appeared to be educating her without convincing her. But, Gaskell explained, “Nor yet can she define her own belief, nor speak about it, nor give her reasons for it” (*Letters* 683). This her mother finds “perplexing,” and fears that Marianne is perplexing “to herself on such subjects” (683). In contemplating her daughter grappling with these matters of intellectual faith, Gaskell reverts to her usual resort in the practical and everyday, claiming in Marianne’s favour that “*Arguments* never did seem to have much force for her in *abstract* things. She is one of the clearest people I know about *practical* things.... However, she is really *trying*; and she is also trying to be so good

⁹² There is some idea, stemming at least partially from Marianne’s sister Meta, that this idea of conversion might have had romantic emotions behind it as well as religious questions (Uglow 500).

⁹³ Mentioned among these influences are Norton, Martineau, and Kingsley. Although this list seems to have originated with Meta, Gaskell does not refute it.

and humble that I feel as if the grace of God would be given her to perceive what to her may be saving truth” (683). Gaskell here praises her daughter for her attempts to believe in Unitarian doctrine, and suggests that even if she cannot articulate intellectually, or even intelligently, what or how she believes, her practical goodness and effort will be enough to lead her in a proper direction. Gaskell ends the letter with further approval of Marianne’s “*great* unselfishness & sweetness, & meekness” (683). Unconvinced, apparently as is Marianne herself, of Marianne’s ability to logically and responsibly choose Unitarianism for herself, Gaskell hoped that Marianne’s good actions and proper feelings ultimately come to the same thing. This willingness or even desire to accept good actions and motivations over intellectual or theological engagement is a prominent theme in religion as it appears in Gaskell’s fiction. It is also perhaps one of the reasons why the particular denominations of her characters often remain unspecified – Christian feeling and Christian action is more important than details of doctrine. In this Gaskell departs from theological writers of her time, such as J.A. Froude or F.D. Maurice, both of whose work Gaskell read and liked, in that for them, though kindness is central, the question of identification of faith is also all important.⁹⁴ This liberal ideology of tolerance is on the one hand evident in the struggles of certain Gaskellian characters to make their feelings fit within the rules of their religion, but on the other undermined by those same struggles, which suggest that the details of intellectual belief and the doctrinal principles that one subscribes to are important as well as good actions and good feelings. There is a complicated tension in Gaskell’s fiction, then, between embracing absolute tolerance and freedom when it comes to religion, and maintaining authoritative rules and principles of faith that insist that there are proper ways of believing and correct beliefs to hold. This is shadowed by another complicated tension, between logic and belief based on reason, which can associate itself with either freedom or authority, and the desire for spontaneous spiritual effusion based on feeling or emotional response, which again can be

⁹⁴ Froude was a friend of the Gaskells and the families visited one another. His novel *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849) presents the crisis that a young man undergoes because he cannot identify where his personal creed fits with established churches. The solution presented to him by his pragmatic uncle, to “remember that the real discipline of the mind is *action*, not speculation; and regular activity alone could keep soul or body from disease” (39) sounds as if it could be advice from Gaskell. However, Froude’s protagonist remains concerned with the doctrine he subscribes to more than the actions he undertakes. Maurice was the son of a Unitarian minister and became an influential theologian and founder of the Christian Socialist movement. Never fully accepted by the Church of England, Maurice’s teachings nevertheless tended toward Anglicanism especially in the question of the divinity of Christ. In his *Theological Essays* (1853) which caused controversy in both camps and which Gaskell defended (Uglow 354) he challenges that Unitarians are “in danger of setting a man above God” (73) and that their rational faith is a stumbling block to spiritual completion. For Maurice, though he felt that Unitarians accomplished good things, not believing in the divinity of Christ prevented them from being true Christians.

attached to highly organized rituals or to extremely free personal responses. These tensions play out in different ways but along gendered lines in the three works I will discuss. Kindness and practicality are the bottom lines to which effective faith comes down for Gaskell, but questions of gender and authority make even these values complex.

“Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras”⁹⁵ is among Elizabeth Gaskell’s first publications, appearing in *Howitt’s Journal* in 1847. Though it has been discussed as part of Gaskell’s body of short fiction, “Libbie Marsh” has rarely been looked at in any depth on its own, and what it reveals about Gaskell’s ideas about gender and religion at the beginning of her writing career has not been examined. A story about one woman’s holy mission and duty, “Libbie Marsh” signals its Christian theme without specifying rules or denominations, focussing instead on connecting feminine fulfillment, through love, with religious duty. Gaskell uses biblical allusion throughout to elevate her simple seamstress heroine, and the surrounding characters, to a level of spiritual significance. When Libbie first arrives in her new area in Manchester, her move is described as “a flitting in our neighbourhood,” and then “hardly a flitting, after all, for it was only a single person changing her place of abode [with] only one large wooden chest” (459).⁹⁶ Libbie Marsh is insignificant indeed. Once she is established, although not quite comfortably, in her new room with her boisterous new landlords, though, the magnitude of Libbie changes, as her luggage becomes her “Noah’s ark of a chest” (462). The comparison is humorous, but still implies a connection between Libbie and the biblical Noah, responsible for taking action to fulfil God’s plans. The connection proves true, as Libbie continues to act as she feels called to, even in the face of the incredulousness and ridicule of her community. She is not Noah, and on the surface it seems ridiculous to compare the two, but once the comparison is made the similarities become apparent. Through her metaphorical ark, Libbie’s insignificance is offset by her importance, and vice versa.

A more difficult piece of biblical resonance in the story is the Christ-like role that the young invalid Franky plays. Franky’s innocence, patience, kindness, and love in the face of the great bodily pain and suffering that he undergoes in his illness, as well as his death which brings

⁹⁵ Later published as “The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh.”

⁹⁶ Flitting is defined as the “action of removing from one abode to another” (Flitting OED) as well as “to pass lightly or softly” (Flit OED). Gaskell invokes both senses here, suggesting that Libbie’s moving does not qualify, finally, as either. The term is also associated with the movements of small birds (Flit OED) which, like the lightness and softness, suggests the lack of physical impact that Libbie makes, which contrasts with her moral and practical significance at the end.

a kind of redemption to his mother and Libbie, hint at Franky as a Christ figure. Beyond these general attributes, however, Gaskell makes a more specific connection through the canary that Libbie gives to him at the beginning of their friendship. The bird is originally called Jupiter, but Libbie “could bring my tongue round to Peter better” (467) and so the bird is delivered with a message renaming him: “Please take notice his name is Peter, and he’ll come if you call him” (468). The reader is given further encouragement to take notice of the bird’s name, as the narrator continues to call it Jupiter,⁹⁷ while all the characters refer to it as Peter. The name Jupiter carries with it ideas of pre-Christian Roman religious mythology, evoking the ultimate patriarchal power of the father of the gods. The name Peter suggests St. Peter,⁹⁸ moving the ideas back into a Christian context, but with the provision that they have undergone a translation. Like the canary’s name, the specifics of religious mythology become fluid here. When Franky insists that Peter accompany the family on their Whitsuntide (Pentecost) outing to the park, because “he’s just like a Christian, so fond of flowers and green things” (471) some connection to St. Peter⁹⁹ seems inevitable. The narrator keeps reminding the reader of Peter’s presence on the trip, but surprisingly it is not the bird that they end up listening to. Instead, the holidayers are regaled by “a ringing peal of children’s voices” in “distant choral praise” (475), which inspires the dying Franky with images of the delightfulness of heaven. The story, then, is replete with biblical associations, but ones that do not pan out according to expectations. Whether Libbie is more than a humble seamstress, whether Franky is Christ, and what the canary shares with St. Peter is never made concrete; rather, Gaskell uses the Bible and its imagery to remind her readers that there is holiness in everyday things, but that the details are necessarily changeable. The importance of Christian feeling over Christian belief systems is made manifest after Franky’s death in the contrasting responses of Libbie and the less-than-sensitive Anne Dixon, who recognises an opportunity for spiritual comfort, but is not equipped to provide it. Anne resorts to expectations: “‘Well! ‘flesh is grass,’ Bible says;’ and, having fulfilled the etiquette of quoting a text, if

⁹⁷ The narrator also repeatedly presents events from the bird’s point of view, which is often in contrast with Franky’s idea of Peter as his “little bird brother” (474) who feels the same about things as he does. For example, Franky’s peaceful sleep, with his “little arm put fondly around the bird cage,” is divested of its saccharine nature by the narrator’s additional comment that “How Jupiter slept this first night is quite another thing” (468). This outside perspective adds humor to the story, while also reminding readers that beliefs are subjective.

⁹⁸ St. Peter is not without his own contributions to expectations of gender, as the Bible attributes the exhortation “ye wives be in subjection to your own husbands” to him. See I. *Peter* 3:1-6.

⁹⁹ See *Acts* 2: 14-41, where Peter implores the crowds gathered at Pentecost to repent and become baptized Christians.

possible, if not of making a moral observation on the fleeting nature of earthly things, [Anne] thought she was at liberty to pass on to her real errand” (483). This meaningless use of the Bible, simply as a polite form, suggests that it is truly the thought that counts. Anne follows up with astonishment that Libbie would rather spend time with Franky’s bereaved mother than be part of Anne’s bridal party. Here, then, religious practice that relies on the authority of the Bible is shown to operate as simply a show, a false front for those who do not actually embody real sympathetic feeling.

Real holiness in “Libbie Marsh” becomes defined as practical, domestic, and caring, but also as a purpose in life for women outside of the traditional feminine role of wife. At the beginning, the Libbie who is too insignificant to even justify the verb “flitting,” is so because she has no role and no identity. Because she is “very plain” (461), Libbie has “hardly even the natural though hidden hope of every young girl’s heart to cheer her on with the bright visions of a home of her own... where, loving and beloved, she might fulfil a woman’s dearest duties” (460-1). However, Libbie’s lack of sexual attractiveness is finally what allows her to take control of her own spiritual and moral destiny. Recognising the unlikelihood of marriage, Libbie devotes herself instead to Franky and then to his “termagant” (463) mother, Margaret Hall. When Libbie announces her intention of moving in with Margaret after Franky’s death, Anne is shocked to think of her living with “such a Tartar!” (488) and Margaret herself warns that “it’s me as will be making your life miserable with my temper” (487). All is well, however, because taking care of and commiserating with Margaret is Libbie’s mission. She explains to the confused Anne:

as I know I’m never likely to have a home of my own, or a husband that would look to me to make all straight, or children to watch over or care for, all of which I take to be woman’s natural work, I must not lose time in fretting and fidgeting after marriage, but just look about me for somewhat else to do. I can see many a one misses it in this. They will hanker after what is ne’er likely to be theirs, instead of facing it out, and settling down to be old maids, and, as old maids, just looking round for the odd jobs God leaves in the world for such as old maids to do. There’s plenty of such work, and there’s the blessing of God on them as does it. (484-5)

This speech is Libbie's creed, and the thesis of the story. It presents woman's work as natural or God-given, but not limited to wifehood or motherhood, and expanded especially to include those who are not married. It very specifically equates work and jobs with holiness, and makes it the means by which single women can earn God's blessing. While Libbie suggests a kind of predetermination in her conception of woman's natural destiny in marriage¹⁰⁰ and her own exclusion from it, she also firmly insists on her own agency. It is her responsibility and decision not to waste time, but to look around for something different that needs to be done, and to "fac[e] it out." The fact that "many a one misses it in this" suggest that while the decision to get married is regarded as the intuitive way of performing one's duty as a woman, doing God's "odd jobs" takes initiative, effort, and a recognition of one's own agency. In case the reader does not grasp the point of Libbie's oration, the narrator explicitly spells it out at the end, identifying the story's moral:¹⁰¹ "[Libbie] has a purpose in life; and that purpose is a holy one" (489). Living with and being of comfort to Margaret, just as she would to a husband, allows Libbie to fulfil her spiritual duty, as she defines it for herself. Importantly, she can do so because she does not have a husband. In a sense, then, Libbie's failure as a sexual object allows her to become a religious subject, in complete, confident, and successful control of her spiritual destiny. Libbie devotes herself to the work that will guarantee her place in heaven, instead of depending on a husband to guide her there, but she is only given the opportunity to do so because she is not a candidate for marriage. In "Libbie Marsh," then, holiness is measured by actions and the motivations behind those actions, and is rewarded with a sense of fulfillment, specifically provided by a means other than marriage. The gestures toward biblical allegory serve to hint to the reader that the story contains a specifically Christian theme and moral, but that it is not one that is restricted by the limits of what is told in the bible or the rules of doctrinal belief. "Libbie Marsh" exemplifies Gaskell's optimistic view of the connection between faith, gender, and agency, one that is successfully made by a woman who has not got other options. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, published over

¹⁰⁰ Marriage, however, gets a dangerous reputation in this story, as the reader learns that Libbie is all alone because of the unhappy marriage of her own parents. Her father was a drunk who ended up killing her little brother and breaking the family's heart. Anne Dixon's marriage, which takes place during the course of the story, does not look promising either, as her husband is also fond of drink, and they both consider marriage "Just a spree" (483).

¹⁰¹ The ironic tone that the narrator takes in announcing the moral is interesting too, as she asks the reader "Do you ever read the moral, concluding sentence of a story? I never do, but I once... heard of a deaf old lady, living by herself, who did; and as she may have left some descendants with the same amiable peculiarity, I will put in, for their benefit, what I believe to be the secret of Lizzie's peace of mind" (489). This roundabout and somewhat cynical approach to the moral suggests both that Gaskell wants to hit the reader over the head with her point, but that she also wants to excuse herself for doing so.

ten years later, she is less optimistic as she discusses the complications that arise surrounding the division of authority in terms of gender when it comes to matters of religion, marriage, and sexual desire.

While *Sylvia's Lovers* is mostly a love story, and not as overtly concerned with theological matters as are *Ruth* and *North and South*, the collection of characters with a plethora of different religious beliefs and the evolution of religious feeling in the two main characters, Sylvia and her cousin / lover / husband Philip, still make it perhaps Gaskell's most complex investigation of religion and faith. Further, the threat of the press gang that is ever present in the story literalizes Gaskell's interest in gender and agency. Men, because they are men and powerful, are candidates for being impressed and thus having their personal physical agency taken away. The effect on the women left behind is telling too, as Gaskell works out what they can do without the men they look to for authority. The dealings with agency and authority as they surround the press gang activity in *Sylvia's Lovers* are intertwined with the questions of religion, as different ways of having faith lead to different conceptions of personal agency, and to different consequences. Criticism on *Sylvia's Lovers* is not as prolific as on the more overtly political social problem novels,¹⁰² or on those that deal more with more specifically gendered situations, like *Ruth* or *Cranford*. Generally, it takes into account the historical setting of the novel, the psychological relationships between the characters, and the undeniable interest in religious practice and belief that runs through the novel. Edgar Wright suggests that *Sylvia's Lovers* is a story about how "even the ultimate influences of religion and affection could be perverted to evil and tragedy" (166), while Arthur Pollard finds the message more positive: "though institutions may fail, the basic Christian values remain and will triumph in the end" (202). Coral Lansbury identifies it as "a study of social tyranny and the irrational tyranny of love" (93), and suggests that Gaskell owes the mood to the Brontë sisters' interest in "a universe controlled by the passions" (102). Patsy Stoneman also sees the Brontës' influence at work (93), but interprets *Sylvia's Lovers* mainly as a dialectic between a masculine world of aggression and competition and a feminine one of nurturance and care, which she suggests Gaskell attempts to resolve by relating God to the maternal (103-4). Hilary Schor reads the novel as metafictional, and considers it to be Gaskell's reflection on the failure of the marriage plot, with "desire crossed

¹⁰² Although Terry Eagleton's essay on "*Sylvia's Lovers* and Legality" makes a convincing case for the novel's inclusion as one of Gaskell's social problem novels.

by history,” “men forging identity through sexual conflict,” and “isolated women, learning to read but forced to read the bible and Eve’s fall over and over” (181). Marion Shaw suggests that the lessons of history it presents reflect on contemporary issues such as the Indian Mutiny, and that “Underlying the representation of conflict and struggle... is the increasing impact of *On the Origin of Species*” (87). Andrew Sanders focuses on the details of the different religious experiences in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, concluding that practical action that “crosses barriers of faith and time” (23) is the central religious ideology celebrated in the novel. There are, then, mixed feelings about how redemptive the religious ending of the story is, as well as about how gender figures in the story. My reading reconciles these problems by positing that the question of authority, religious or gendered, is the central message of *Sylvia’s Lovers*, and that Gaskell’s answer is one that is based in her Unitarian belief in earthly practicalities as well as heavenly promises. Ultimately, though, even this is problematic for women, whose lack of power in the economic realm restricts their spiritual agency because they depend on their husbands and fathers for spiritual guidance, and those men can let them down. As Gaskell works through a message promoting religious agency and responsibility, she begins to reveal the difficulty facing women whose spirituality is tied to their sexuality. On the one hand the novel teaches that everyone must take personal responsibility for his or her actions and that religion needs to be more than simply a show or a crutch. On the other, it reveals that unlike Libbie Marsh, Sylvia’s beauty places her in a position where she is prevented from having that responsibility. The means to achieve religious comfort, that peace of mind that Libbie has, comes to a wife through her duty to her husband, a duty that is difficult to accept when that husband has himself been morally negligent. God’s authority, governmental authority, and personal authority come in to conflict in matters of gender and spirituality.

The conflict between authority and personal will and the spiritual implications of that conflict are brought to the reader’s attention fairly early in the novel, as the funeral of Darley, who died trying to defend himself and the rest of his whaling crew from the press gang, becomes a confluence of political and religious crisis. Dr. Wilson, the Anglican vicar, presides over the funeral service and, as Sanders puts it, “he muffs his task” (17). Gaskell makes clear, though, that Wilson “had a very difficult part to play, and a still more difficult sermon to write” as his “sympathies as a man had been all on the bereaved father’s side” (65). Authority is called into play by the captain of the press gang’s exhortations on the importance of “due subordination and

loyalty” and the danger of encouraging actions like Darley’s (65), so Wilson, “a kindly, peaceable old man” (65) has no recourse but to “mumble... hastily over a sermon on the text, ‘In the midst of life we are in death’; which might have done as well for a baby ... as for the strong man shot down” (65). Like Anne Dixon in “Libbie Marsh,” Wilson ineffectually uses a biblical text as a matter of form, inappropriate to the reality of the occasion. But, though Wilson himself recognises his capitulation to the demand of the law as a failure, especially when he looks on “the straining gaze of the father Darley, seeking with all his soul to find a grain of comfort in the chaff of words” (66), the funeral surprisingly does bring comfort to the senior Darley. He has come to the church temporarily faithless and questioning how God could “permit such cruel injustice to man? ... what was life, and what was death, but woe and despair?” (67), but he departs with his “childlike trust” (67) reaffirmed: “The beautiful solemn words of the ritual had done him good, and restored much of his faith.... he kept saying to himself in a whisper... ‘It is the Lord’s doing,’ and the repetition soothed him unspeakably” (67-8). While those who seek intellectual engagement with their religion – Wilson, the narrator, and the implied reader – are let down by the poor compromise the vicar has to make, Darley’s need is an emotional one. Even his doubts as to the logic of things are soothed by the only answer that can be given: faith. Repetition and ritual, familiar reminders of what he has always believed and how, is what is able to bring Darley back from dangerous despair to a state of calm. The feeling of disappointment remains, but it is reserved for those further from the situation. It is perhaps enhanced by the reader’s expectation, set up by the vicar’s own dissatisfaction with his sermon, and confused by Darley’s faith. Gaskell creates a conundrum where the reader is invited to view the pulpit as a political site and to regret the shirking of that responsibility, but when he or she is shown the efficacy of simple ritual, the role of religion seems to be more importantly to work on the emotions than through the intellect. Wilson, as Sanders recognises, is “a conspicuous representative of the Establishment” who “ends up enacting an awkward, if not exactly classical, Anglican compromise” (17). For Wilson it is a compromise of principles; for Gaskell, compromise itself becomes a necessary by-product of Christian faith, Anglican or otherwise, because of her interest in the practical and earthly aspects of religion as well as the heavenly. While preserving the ideal of divine justice and perfection, religion must also offer solace and be useful to individuals. Gaskell extends the negotiable nature of Christianity to encompass more than just the Anglican faith, establishing that the Quaker Foster brothers, who employ Philip

Hepburn in their shop, “though scrupulous in most things, it did not go against the consciences of those good brothers to purchase smuggled articles” (26). Their hypocrisy is excused somewhat here by the condition that “Everybody in Monkshaven smuggled who could” (26) and by their very kindly behaviour, but still Gaskell suggest that inevitably even the most pious have limits to their morality, and so a forgiving God is necessary. From the beginning, then, the reader is invited to perceive the conflicts, limits, and potential of religious belief, as well as to think about how it works on both rational and emotional levels.

The main male protagonist in *Sylvia's Lovers* is the serious and pious Philip Hepburn, but he is set in contrast throughout with Sylvia's other lover, the dashing, adventurous, masculine, Charley Kinraid.¹⁰³ Charley is not represented as particularly spiritually inclined, which, ironically, adds to his attractiveness in the eyes of Sylvia and arguably the reader. His lack of adherence to formal religious worship is mirrored by his lack of submission to other forms of authority, most notably the press gang, which in the world of this novel is ultimate heroism. When he is finally overpowered, unable to fight the press gang, which outnumbers him and has the advantage of surprise, Charley “suffered himself to be dragged without any resistance... the strong colour brought into his face while fighting was gone now... as if it cost him more effort to be passive, wooden, and stiff in their hands” (201). Charley depends on his personal agency for his identity, so it is harder for him to give in than to continue fighting. Because they absolutely rob him of that agency, the press gang in this episode reveals just how dangerous they are, as the forced passivity of Charley, whose very essence is to be in control, is the beginning of all the troubles that follow, especially for Sylvia. As Charley's personality is an independent one, his system of belief and of morality, as much as is revealed to the reader, is a personal one. He lives in the moment, believes in personal experience, and bases his morals and actions likewise on his own reasoning, although it does not always seem straightforwardly reasonable. For example, he swears that he has seen “th' mouth o' Hell” in the ice of the southern seas, and that “that peep at terrors forbidden to any on us afore our time” (98) causes the death of the ship's captain. This revelation does not send Charley to church, however, but only to the resolution to “never sail those seas again” even though “It were a prosperous voyage” (98). Charley is fully in control of how he interacts with both the earthly and the otherworldly. When it comes to his relationship

¹⁰³ In turn, Charley is compared throughout with Sylvia's father Daniel, and shown to be a similar kind of man, although a more successful one.

with Sylvia, he is no less in control. Unlike Philip, who sulks, Charley is able to enjoy a party even after Sylvia has left it, because “accustomed to prompt decision, [he] resolved that she and no other should be his wife” (143). He must return to his whaling ship before this marriage can come to pass, but not before he solidifies the promise in his own eyes. Nabbed by the press gang, Charley commands Philip to remind Sylvia of “the great oath we took together this morning; she’s as much my wife as if we’d gone to church” (204). When he returns and finds his intended married to his rival, he confronts Sylvia with this same promise: “you are my wife, not his. I am your husband; we plighted each other our troth” (347). For Charley, the engagement, though not officially sanctioned by any religion, is as binding as if it were, because his faith is in himself and Sylvia, not in the laws of the church. Having lost Sylvia through Philip’s machinations, however, Charley is able to give her up, and in spite of his apparently strong feelings, to marry again. When he believes himself to be dying, “the unwonted tears came to his eyes as he thought of his newly-made wife” (390), evidence that his heart is now hers. Charley’s self-sufficient spiritual and moral code is what makes him attractive and masculine, but it also prevents him from experiencing the depth of feeling that Philip and Sylvia do. Charley’s strong self-reliance ultimately means he is devoted only to himself. Powerful and stubbornly non-submissive masculinity, then, is not perfection, although it does leave Charley himself comfortable and fulfilled.

Charley’s decisive action and manly disregard for authority, forms, and proprieties that are not of his own making are essentially a foil for Sylvia’s other lover Philip, whose masculinity and spirituality are both at stake in the story. Like Charley’s, Philip’s official religious denomination is never made clear, but unlike his rival, Philip is determinedly a religious man. His association with the Quaker Foster brothers and his landlady Alice Rose give his practice a Puritan, serious, no-frills, somewhat disapproving aspect, though he himself is not a Quaker. Rather, he embodies some of their values without appreciating others. This tendency is made manifest in Philip’s choice of his bright, lively, impetuous, and very beautiful cousin Sylvia over the sombre and serious and more quietly lovely Hester Rose. It also becomes problematic in bringing that choice to fruition, as Philip’s strict ideas about morality and properly subdued behaviour are precisely what make him unattractive in Sylvia’s eyes and incompatible with her. This is evident from the beginning, when Philip advises the “bright and charming” (29) Sylvia against buying the scarlet cloak that has filled her thoughts for the first several pages of the book,

and continues as he attempts to court her, becoming most pronounced at the New Year's Fête where Charley is also present. Too reserved to join the games himself, Philip is relieved when Sylvia refuses to kiss Charley: "he yearned to go to her and tell her how he approved of her conduct" (137). The narrator shows just how mistaken Philip is, interjecting, "Alas, Philip! Sylvia, though as modest a girl as ever lived, was no prude" (137), and the rest of the party guests recognize that it is because Sylvia is attracted to Charley that she is too proud to kiss him. Philip's reaction reveals that not only is he unnecessarily prudish, but that his overblown sense of propriety blinds him to certain aspects of reality. Further, his interests in intellectual pursuits such as reading and languages and his political stance on the press gangs – that their actions are mandated by the government for the good of the country and therefore should not be interfered with – separates him from men like Charley and Daniel. His profession as a clerk in Fosters' shop makes Philip "little better nor a woman, for sure, bein' mainly acquaint wi' ribbons" (192) according to Daniel. While shop-keeping is not necessarily an unmanly profession in Gaskell's view, in associating Philip with the feminine in worldly things, Gaskell questions his masculinity in spiritual things, and shows how his decisions to submit to what he takes to be the authority of God, as he submits unquestioningly to the authority of law, make him unmanly. Philip needs to take responsibility for his own actions and recognise his own agency while still maintaining faith in God in order to become a man who can take proper care of the spiritual life of his wife and family. Patsy Stoneman makes the important point, though, that while Philip's "occupation does not distinguish him from women" (97), his growing financial power does. The only way in which Philip is a masculine success is in his capitalist endeavours, as he has worked his way into a position of some financial power. Philip is disliked by Sylvia and her father because of his feminine lack of spirit and submission to authority, but he is recognised by Sylvia's mother – and by himself – as a financial success and therefore a worthy and prudent match for Sylvia. While his prudery and piousness hold Philip back, eventually it is his hard-earned money and the comforts that come with it that win her. Having the authority and power that he does through the financial independence that he has gained causes problems for Philip though, because he refuses to be responsible for the power that he has on a moral and religious level. Because his financial and spiritual authority are at odds, Philip's marriage to Sylvia, whom he can provide for financially but not morally, faces such difficulty.

In spite of his careful conscientiousness in certain things, most often matters of his cousin's behaviour, Philip's piousness is easily turned toward self-serving schemes, which further undercuts the idea that a religion of rules and forms above all works best. In fact, until his epiphany at the end of the novel, Philip's religious feeling is almost entirely hypocritical, and this is evident enough that even the naïve Sylvia and the silly Molly Corney recognise it. Discovered in an early action¹⁰⁴ that does not match his precepts, Philip does not regret the deed, "but he was annoyed to perceive how quickly his little cousin had discovered that his practice did not agree with his preaching" (45). Philip does not care about doing what is officially right, and significantly no one else does in this case either, as the act in question is the selling of prohibited goods, which is a large part of the local economy. Unlike the rest of the townspeople, Philip condemns acting outside of the law, so when he is reminded that he himself is not entirely law-abiding, he regrets the discovery. He also does not see that he would much more easily win the favour of Sylvia and her father if he were not so self-righteous in the first place. Instead he worries that "his uncle might make use of his practice as an argument against the preaching he had lately been indulging in" (45). The fact that Philip recognises his preaching as an indulgence – a luxury for himself to find fault with the practice of others – reinforces his hypocrisy and the wrongheaded nature of his motives. Gaskell makes clear to the reader from the beginning that Philip has a distorted sense of what good, pious behaviour really is, and his religious hypocrisy really becomes culpable when he deceives Sylvia regarding Charley's disappearance. Philip's background under Alice's influence has given him some sense of a fate predetermined by God, which he uses when it works to his advantage. He is contemplating fate and destiny as he is about to encounter Charley and the press gang: "He had meant to shape his own life, and now it was, as it were, being shaped for him, and yet he was reproached for the course it was taking, as much a though he were an active agent" (190). Philip wants to claim passivity in this event – being chosen to represent the Fosters in London – because he can see that his fellow clerk, William Coulson, is hurt by the idea that he was not given the same opportunity. At the same time though, the life that Philip meant to shape was one that saw him going down this same successful path. This defensive sidestepping of responsibility for disregarding the desires of others in order to promote himself foreshadows Philip's next move. Upon first recognizing that

¹⁰⁴ Philip is involved in smuggling goods for the Fosters' shop. He is embarrassed to have it discovered "Not because of the smuggling; everyone did that, only it was considered polite to ignore it" (45).

Charley is about to be impressed, Philip murmurs to himself “It is God’s providence” (199) and tries “to deafen as well as blind himself” (199) by covering his face with his hands, so that by not actually seeing the event he can escape responsibility. In spite of this and his attempts to conceal himself, though, Philip is spotted by Charley and asked to tell Sylvia what has happened and to remind her of Charley’s love and of her promise to wait for him. Though he afterwards convinces himself that Charley’s impressment is the answer to “his wild prayer to be rid of his rival” (205), Philip’s immediate reaction is to feel “his passion boiling over at the thought of having been chosen out from among all men to convey such a message as Kinraid’s to Sylvia” (204). Philip is the only man on the beach aside from Charley and the members of the press gang, so that choice that he resents he must conceive of as divine. He is quick to turn around and decide, without admitting that it is a decision, that Charley’s disappearance and the subsequent assumption of his death is divine intervention on his behalf that will save Sylvia from Charley¹⁰⁵ and for himself.

Philip defends his decision to himself by being unsure of whether he did actually promise to deliver the message at all: “He could not recollect how much, how little he had said.... he doubted if Kinraid had caught his words” (205). The reader is made aware of Philip’s excuse, knowing only that “Philip said something inarticulately” (204), but also recognises that it is no excuse. His responsibility is to tell Sylvia, whether he promised to or not. Philip continues to rely on fate as an excuse for not revealing what he witnessed. He is prevented from adding the information to a letter to his uncle by sleeping late and barely catching the early mail. Having sent the letter, “he experienced the relief which it always is to an undecided man, and generally is to anyone who has been paltering with duty, when circumstances decide for him. In the first case, it is pleasant to be relieved from the burden of decision; in the second, the responsibility seems to be shifted on to impersonal events” (208). The narrator here suggests that Philip’s relief comes only from “circumstances,” not God or fate, so the reader is very aware of Philip’s error in the matter. After he has beguiled Sylvia into marrying him, because she thinks Charley is dead and she has no one else to turn to,¹⁰⁶ Philip begins to feel the consequences of his hypocrisy. He

¹⁰⁵ Because he has heard rumors of Charley breaking other girls’ hearts, Philip genuinely believes that Charley is simply toying with Sylvia’s affections and will move on to a new woman as soon as he is out of her sight. Charley’s reputation as a rake is never substantiated or denied as the story progresses.

¹⁰⁶ Here, as elsewhere, Sylvia is in a similar situation to the one Gaskell’s Ruth is in right before she falls. Both women are powerless and hopeless because of a lack of money. The difference is that Sylvia is aware of the nature of the decision she is making. She later suggests that the consequences could be similar when she declares that to

recognises that his wife is not as attractive to him when she does the things he wishes her to instead of reacting with her old impetuous and genuine – and generally disobedient – passion. Even as he is experiencing the repercussions of his lie about Charley in his dissatisfying marriage, however, Philip is still using religion for materialistic ends:

he went regularly twice a day to church on Sundays. There was enough religious feeling in him to make him disguise the worldly reason for such conduct from himself. He believed that he went because he thought it right to attend public worship in the parish church whenever it was offered up; but it may be questioned of him, as of many others, how far he would have been as regular in attendance in a place where he was not known. (326)

The narrator follows with the ironic comment that “With this, however, we have nothing to do” (326). Of course, “we” readers have everything to do with this aspect of who Philip is, as we learn over the course of the story just how dangerous the abuse of religious beliefs and practices for selfish reasons really is. One of the morals of the story is gathered from Philip’s mistakes, as the reader learns that piousness must come from pure motivations and responsibility, and not be about personal gain.

After the crisis of Charley’s reappearance and Sylvia’s disowning Philip as her husband, Philip undertakes a spiritual journey where he slowly begins to take action and responsibility, which ultimately leads him to peace, although it is peace in death. Philip’s physical journey begins with him looking in a mirror and feeling disgusted with his drooping and colourless appearance, which he contrasts with Charley’s handsome uprightness. This “comparison drove Philip from passive helplessness to active despair” (351), and as he finally becomes interested in acting instead of passively accepting his fate as God’s will, Philip begins to evolve. He is attracted by a recruiting sergeant because he is “handsome, bright, and active, in his gay red uniform” (355) and although when he realizes he has been duped into signing himself up for the marines, Philip is “resigned, with utterly despondent passiveness, to the fate to which he had pledged himself” (356) he has at least attached himself to action.¹⁰⁷ At the battle of Acre, Philip

live any longer as Philip’s wife would be to jeopardise her soul, because he essentially tricked her into marrying him (347-8). Stoneman points out that both *Ruth* and *Sylvia’s Lovers* take inspiration from George Crabbe’s “Ruth” from his *Tales of the Hall*, published in 1819 (92).

¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to notice that Philip is essentially impressed into military duty, but in his case his ability to reason is overpowered by alcohol and his confused state of mind, compared to Charley, whose physical strength is overwhelmed. In both cases the military impressers act upon what is most powerful in their victims.

does have his moment of manly glory, strength, and heroism as he risks his life to save that of his enemy: “he bent down over Kinraid... he lifted him up, carrying him like a child; and with the vehement energy that is more from the force of will than the strength of the body, he bore him back to within the shelter of the ravelin – not without many shots being aimed at them” (391). Philip’s moment of masculine redemption is his moment of Christian redemption too, as he embraces his enemy and does so through his own will and action. Gaskell does not allow Philip to return a triumphant manly and moral hero in a gay red uniform and sweep Sylvia off her feet, however, but suggests that in fact there is more to true spiritual awakening than being like Charley. Philip’s heroic moment is almost immediately followed by his accidental maiming,¹⁰⁸ which puts an end to his visions of “returning gay and gallant, and thus regaining his wife’s love” (410) as well as to the idea that his life is now free from the interference of fate or chance. The burned and disfigured Philip must come to terms with his physical being – now even further removed from Charley-like attractiveness – while accepting that true spiritual commitment may not change the world around him or the things that happen to him, but that he absolutely has the agency to change himself for the better through his thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions.

Discharged from the marines and worried about his future as a poor pensioner, Philip’s luck or fate appears to take another upswing, as he stumbles upon the hospital of St. Sepulchre and is given the opportunity to stay as an inmate, a bedesman, because he happens to have served under the warden’s son’s command. Philip, “almost in spite of himself, became installed in a bedesman’s house at St. Sepulchre” (419). This episode in his journey is somewhat incongruous with the plot line of the story, as it seems an unnecessary pause on Philip’s way home, but it is important if one takes into account the parallel spiritual journey and Philip’s quest for religious identity. Sanders argues that Philip’s sojourn at the hospital “serves to enlarge Philip’s religious context beyond Quaker pacifism and Anglican respectability into an older Catholic view of history” (22), suggesting that moving beyond the hospital’s walls, as well as its Catholic rituals and Gothic imagery, “utterly alien to the no-nonsense Victorian Unitarian vision” (22) foreshadows Philip’s moving beyond his idolatry of Sylvia herself. The Catholic tone of the place certainly does have its effect on Philip, but he is stifled at the same time as he is relieved by his reprieve there. Though “At first the repose of the life and the place was inexpressibly

¹⁰⁸ Stoneman argues that the “purely fortuitous explosion which, far from confirming [Philip’s] heroic manhood, leaves him sick, poor, and unrecognized” (102) is Gaskell’s critique of war and the chauvinistic ideologies that celebrate it.

grateful to Philip,” he soon becomes “restless and uneasy in the midst of all this peace and comfort” (420). Philip’s unresolved relationship with Sylvia haunts him so he cannot be at peace; further action needs to be taken and so St. Sepulchre is not the answer. It is, rather, another temptation for Philip, one that is clearly attractive because Philip’s deformity makes his appearance among strangers painful, and his financial straits mean that going elsewhere will be going as a pauper. Leaving St. Sepulchre makes Philip’s reformation of character clearly evident. While he is still motivated by his feelings for Sylvia, the point is that he is motivated and takes action, instead of passively allowing fate to determine his life for him and leave him in his peaceful but passive existence in the sheltered safety of the hospital. Importantly too, the warden and other bedesmen are sad to see Philip go because he “had attached some of the older bedesmen a good deal to him, from his unselfishness, his willingness to read to them, and to render them many little services” (423). This new selfless aspect of Philip’s character is connected with the fact that he leaves St. Sepulchre “with his sore heart partly healed by his four months’ residence there” (423). The hospital episode teaches Philip to selflessly care for strangers, as well as to resist the final temptation of giving up action for rest.

It is at the end of the novel, when Philip is on his deathbed and has won Sylvia’s love and forgiveness, that he finally reaches spiritual clarity. Philip is dying as the result of another heroic action, that of saving his own young daughter from drowning. Critics find the conclusion of *Sylvia’s Lovers* difficult. Edgar Wright, for example, reads it as “an emotional affirmation of faith and purpose as a guide to life” (188) but suggests that in conveying this message Gaskell “reverts to the sentimental fervour and piety with marks the ending of *Ruth*” (187), which he finds ineffective. More recently, Marion Shaw explains the ending as promoting an almost opposite message: “The great lesson of *Sylvia’s Lovers* is the painful truth of history that there is not necessarily a purposeful, progressive narrative of human life, or only, perhaps, in a heaven that lies outside of the remit of the historical novel” (88). In both cases there is a sense of disappointment in the ending, arguably frustration that once Philip has finally become a man in that he stops referring to authority and takes his own action and responsibility, he dies, and his communion with God feels like punishment of Sylvia. What seems like poor recompense on an earthly level is precisely the point when it comes to Philip, however, as he has learned that the heavenly is what matters. No-longer a hypocrite and no-longer an idolater, he declares to Sylvia, “if I could live my life o’er again I would love my God more, and thee less” (448). Philip cannot

reconcile his love for God and his love for Sylvia because she seems to make him act selfishly. Forgiven and caressed by her, though, the dying Philip recalls “all that he had ever read about God, and all that the blessed Christ - that bringeth glad tidings of joy unto all people, had said of the Father, from whom He came. Those sayings dropped like balm down upon his troubled heart and brain” (452). The careful separation of Christ from the father here reflects Gaskell’s Unitarianism, and associates that faith with Philip’s ultimate redemption and the merciful nature of God. The understanding that Philip finally comes to in the end, though not specifically identified as such, comes with a Unitarian notion of Christ as the human connection that translates divine authority in the “balm” that soothes human fears. Gaskell, then, neatly steers Philip through a course of religious learning that takes him from a misdirected insistence on the surface appearance of seriousness and sobriety and Puritanism, through a despair of faithlessness, through the temptations of idleness and Catholicism, to a final peace in understanding true Christian love that looks very much like Unitarianism. Along the way, Philip goes from being a passive passenger in his own life, justifying wrongs through pre-determinism, to taking responsibility and control, and from a feminised and sexually unattractive boy, to a heroic soldier, to a truly Christian hero whose actions are motivated only by the good of others. This nicely wrapped up program of evolution is complicated, however, by the perspective of Sylvia and the female characters in the novel, which undermines the redemptive peace of Philip’s death by querying the value of heavenly happiness over earthly and especially the authority of one gender over the other when it comes to matters of spirituality.

As the examples of mature womanhood in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Alice Rose and Bell Robson are Sylvia’s role models, and they present options of religion and morality against which the reader is meant to judge Sylvia herself, as well as the male characters. Alice is representative of a less hypocritical Puritanism than that which Philip exhibits. She is the purveyor of a certain wisdom and insight, along with what is clearly meant to be critiqued as “an excess of self-discipline and laws” (Sanders 21). Her character is summed up in the will that she gets Philip’s fellow clerk, William, to write up for her. Having insisted that he explain the flourish he has made on the page by writing, “This is my doing, William Coulson, and none of Alice Rose’s, she being in her sound mind” (77), Alice proceeds to lay out very specifically to whom each of her possessions should go, based on who will find them most useful and enjoyable. Her strict rules as to the no-nonsense form of the will seem unnecessary and ridiculous, but the practicality of the

will itself reflects positively on Alice's insistence on the straightforward. Alice's belief in God's elect is presented as silly throughout the book, but she is both hard and strict enough in her religious beliefs to convince Sylvia that her own need mending, and open enough to help her to do it, even though she is at first rather wary of Sylvia as "light-minded and full of vanity" (400). That is, even though Alice believes in predestination and a spiritual elect, she also believes in the practical power of religious thought and action within the worldly sphere. Watching Sylvia become depressed and despondent after Philip goes away, Alice proclaims, "It's religion as must comfort thee, child, as it's done many a one afore thee" (381), and it is Alice who finally succeeds in teaching Sylvia to read so that she can take control of her spirituality to the point at least that she can understand the Bible for herself. In Alice herself, then, there is a disconnect between, or a melding of, overly strict theological beliefs that are made ridiculous, and a real respect for the practical applications and effects of religious thinking in everyday life.

Bell Robson, Sylvia's mother, is similar to Alice in her interest in pious appearance and propriety. Like Philip, she hopes Sylvia will choose the gray over the scarlet cloak. Bell also approves of Philip, who is her nephew, and she considers him a better choice for Sylvia than Charley, although – or because – she herself has married a man who is shown to be very similar to Charley. When it comes to the practice of religion, however, as Sanders points out, Bell and her family "only sporadically" (19) attend service, and institutionalised religion and the church are only really called into play in the emergency of Daniel's arrest, "as devices which serve to appease an unnecessarily angry god" (19). Bell's everyday religion is her husband, upon whom she depends as her only authority. Thus it makes sense that though she is pious, Bell does not regularly attend church, and in spite of her faith in rules and laws, she unquestioningly supports the riots against the press gangs. Bell believes in Daniel and in Daniel's beliefs. She explains her views on men and women's roles to Sylvia: "th' feyther's feyther, and we mun respect him. But it's dree work havin' a man i' th' house... and not a soul coming near us, not even to fall out wi' him; for thee and me must na' do that, for th' Bible's sake, dear, and a good stand-up wordy quarrel would do him a power of good" (47). It is no wonder that Daniel has "a strong notion of being a kind of domestic Jupiter" (52), for Bell's literal understanding of the rules of gender in the Bible means that she has to revere him as her god.¹⁰⁹ This contributes to the tragedy when

¹⁰⁹ Bell's very traditional reading of the biblical role of women is reminiscent of Anne Leigh's belief in "Milton's famous line" ("Lizzie Leigh" 206) as she lives for god in her husband. Gaskell's interrogation of it here supports

Daniel is hanged for his involvement in the press gang riots, for without him to direct her, Bell loses her mind. It is to provide physical but also emotional comfort for Bell that Sylvia decides to go through with marrying Philip, putting Bell back under the protection and authority of a man and thus “giving her as much peace as she could ever know” (297). Bell’s religious devotion to her husband and to the submissive feminine role leads to the sacrifice of Sylvia to trying to do the same thing. That Bell herself goes crazy without her husband to support her implies that even her complete commitment to the biblical rules of gender that say he is her god is seriously problematic, especially when outside influence interfere with his authority and take him away from her.

If Philip and Charley are rivals, there is a complementary rivalry between Sylvia and Hester Rose, except that Hester does not give in to the temptation to undermine her rival as Philip does. Hester is throughout the story the epitome of graceful religious faith and genuine good feeling, even when it is in spite of her own desire and comfort. Hester’s religious affiliation is described in concert with her outward appearance: “She was dressed in stuff of sober colours, both in accordance with her own taste, and in unasked compliance with the religious customs of the Fosters; but Hester herself was not a Friend” (28). It is not because of any rules that tell her to, but because of an innate sense of propriety and a sympathy with the wishes of the Fosters that Hester chooses sober dress. Hester’s lack of official religious denomination is reiterated when Sylvia hears she has gone to a Methodist meeting and wonders if she is a Methodist. Philip replies, “She’s neither a Methodee, nor a Friend, nor a Church person; but she’s a turn for serious things, choose wherever they’re found” (125). As Hester’s personal choice of sombre clothing contrasts with Sylvia’s scarlet cloak, her propensity for “serious things” sets her above the uneducated and uninterested Sylvia. Unlike Charley, too, there is absolutely nothing dubious about Hester, and Sylvia herself is quick to recognize how perfect she is. Critics also see Hester as the real heroine of *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Sanders suggests that “it is Hester who is nearest to the novelist’s own heart, although she is never the centre of the novel’s interest” (23), and Shaw sees her as a proto-feminist role model in that she “earns her keep, refuses to marry a man she does

Gleadle’s argument that even radical Unitarians were not so enlightened as to not see the man as the head of the spiritual household. Gleadle points out that “even those Unitarians customarily attributed with progressive attitudes towards women perpetrated many of the conservative mores of contemporary culture” (24) and cites William Rathbone Greg and Gaskell herself, among others, as examples of the tension between “superior education and liberal backgrounds” (4) for women, and the fact that socially Unitarian women still “were relative creatures. They existed not for their own fulfillment, but for that of their menfolk” (24).

not love, and gives her life to duty and service to others” (85). Hester is certainly a role model for Sylvia, whose forgiveness of Philip comes about through her admiration of Hester’s general philanthropic feeling toward all her fellow creatures, as well as coming to understand Hester’s specific love for Philip.

If Hester has a flaw, though, it is that she does not act on that love, but keeps her emotions hidden away. She goes about “in so quiet and methodical a way, with so even and undisturbed a temper, that she was almost forgotten.... She was a star, the brightness of which was only recognised in times of darkness” (329). Hester is so self-sacrificing that she almost seems to not have a self, although Gaskell complicates this by suggesting that Hester’s personal feelings are necessarily intertwined with her general goodness. The real problem is that Philip is blinded by Sylvia’s beauty and cannot see that self, nor can he value it. Hester comes closest to revealing something of her inner heart after an inspiring religious meeting: “Merely personal and self-conscious feelings were merged in a loving good-will to all her fellow-creatures. Under the influence of this large charity, she forgot her habitual reserve, and came forward as Philip entered to meet him with her New Year’s wishes.... He took her hand, and shook it warmly in reply” (144). Hester’s reaction to his touch shows that her desire for Philip is more than philanthropic, as the “flush on her cheeks deepened as she withdrew [her hand]” (144). Her romantic feelings for Philip generally prevent her from being herself around him, but overcoming them in a general spirit of good will actually furthers Hester’s desires, in as much as she receives the handshake from her beloved. The flush indicates both Hester’s enjoyment of the physical contact, and her returning self-consciousness of her sexuality. The idea here seems to be that personal, romantic love should naturally be a part of that greater Christian love for humanity, but Hester is too concerned with self-denial to make that connection. Hester’s inability to properly understand and partake in effusive personal feeling is cemented by the fact that she grows to like Sylvia better when Sylvia is least like her natural self, when she sees that Sylvia “seemed to have no will of her own; she served her mother and child for love; she obeyed her husband in all things, and never appeared to pine after gaiety or pleasure” (330). Just as Philip cannot initially see that Sylvia is not attracted by his prudish sense of morality and propriety, Hester is unable to comprehend that Philip would rather have the genuine Sylvia, “would have hailed petulant words or wilful actions with unspeakable thankfulness for relief” (330), than the dull, obedient, unnatural version. Hester’s actions and motivations on a grand scale are perfect in

their selflessness and true Christian feeling; however, her intense focus on the sombre and serious and religious aspects of life mean that she misses out on the earthly one. Hester lacks the agency to help herself because she denies her own desires. On the other hand, Hester is in many ways like Libbie Marsh, in control of her own spiritual destiny because her romantic aspirations do not come to pass. In fact, Hester chooses a single life over marriage to William Coulson, whom she does not love. Because of her own position in the shop Hester can keep herself and her mother and does not need to marry.

In spite, then, of Hester's almost perfection, in many ways the much more obviously flawed Sylvia represents the novel's heart and Gaskell's real questions about faith and agency in women's lives. The tragedy of the novel is that Sylvia's faith is dependent on gender expectations, which limit both her self-will and her ability to connect with God. As Sanders establishes, Sylvia, like her parents, is not a regular church-goer. Instead, her moral code is based on her love for her home, her parents, and her own strong but childish will, as well as her sense of the beauty of life. When the reader first encounters Sylvia,¹¹⁰ she is appropriately barefoot, "dipping her little rosy toes in the cool rushing water and whisking them out with childish glee" (16), and "ready to smile or to pout, or to show her feelings in any way, with a character as undeveloped as a child's, affectionate, wilful, naughty, tiresome, charming, anything" (28). She is also "the prettiest creature ever seen" (28). Sylvia is instinctive and impulsive, doing and saying what she feels, and her impetuosity, which is generally motivated by kindness, makes her very attractive both to the reader and to the other characters within the story. Commenting on Sylvia's character at the beginning, Wright declares her "attractive, loyal, and affectionate, but self-willed" (177). Hughes and Lund point to Sylvia's "distinctive personality," her appeal "to many different people in her world," and her "unusual strength, deriving from her ties to the sea" (53). This intrinsic self will or strength is not a negative aspect in Sylvia, but rather the world that she lives in with its dependence on masculine authority that is then undermined by the press gangs forces her to become unnaturally passive and submissive, which contributes to her tragedy. Like her mother, Sylvia is willing to accept her father's authority at home, although she recognises that there is a certain ridiculousness to not questioning it. When the rheumatic Daniel is stuck at home and interfering with Bell's work, Sylvia proposes, "as much for fun as for

¹¹⁰ Sylvia's name also connects her to a Romantic conception and celebration of God in nature and the earthly beauty of natural things.

anything else, that his ignorant directions should be followed, and the consequences brought before his eyes and his nose” (47), and she devises a plan to get the travelling tailor to come and entertain him, without revealing that she has done so. Sylvia is an active agent, within limits, as long as her father is alive. Watching the press gang at work from the safety of Fosters’ shop with Hester, Philip, and Molly Corney, it is Sylvia who longs to be involved: “‘But can we do nothing for ‘em?’ cried Sylvia. ‘Let us go into t’ thick of it and do a bit of help; I can’t stand quiet and see’t!’ Half crying, she pushed forwards to the door, but Philip held her back” (31). Philip’s admonishment to her not to “be silly; it’s the law, and no one can do aught against it, least of all women and lasses” (31) is the lesson that Sylvia learns over the course of the book, to her own detriment. She goes from being an active force – at the New Year’s Fête she “unconsciously” takes “his place as actor in the game” (139), while Philip watches – to a passive one, especially when it comes to her relationship with Philip, to whom she becomes “listless and civil; she had lost all that active feeling towards him which made him positively distasteful” (248). After she marries Philip, Sylvia’s former will is only exercised in her determination to walk on the beach, which Philip dislikes, and in the incident where she helps to pull Charley’s ship to safety, which, though she has no idea who is on it, leaves her feeling “gladness and high rejoicing” (338) simply to have done something useful. Agency is part of Sylvia’s essential character, but through expectations of submission and blows to her faith in justice and love, Sylvia is forced to abandon it.

The death of Sylvia’s father because he refuses to give in to the authority of the law is what forces this change in Sylvia, which is challenged by her coming to recognize Philip’s hypocrisy but then reaffirmed by what she perceives as Charley’s betrayal. Believing in men, when those men face challenges that they cannot overcome, is what causes Sylvia’s downfall, but in the end men are still all she has to depend on. This dependence is clearly delineated upon economic lines. Bell is the first to articulate the problem, before it has really amounted to one. She says, “It’s a pity as wenches aren’t lads” (118) as she thinks about Sylvia’s future. Schor expands on this idea, suggesting that the fact that “Sylvia cannot own and run her father’s farm, which would save her from having to marry Philip” (166) is evidence of Gaskell’s interest in expressing the problem of male realms being closed to women.¹¹¹ It is clear that had her father

¹¹¹ Schor points out the similar injustice of Hester not being given a share in the shop when the two male clerks inherit. She is expected instead to marry one of them, which does not come to pass (166). After both young men

lived, or Charley's whereabouts been known to her, Sylvia would never have married Philip. She explains herself to Kester, asking, "what could I do? what can I do? He's my cousin, and mother knows him and likes him... and he'll keep mother in comfort all t' rest of her days" (296). As much as her marriage to Philip is a mercenary one, and as much as she genuinely likes Charley, Sylvia's planned marriage to him is not free from a hint of economic dealing as well. The engagement is kept secret from Bell as she expects Sylvia to marry someone more financially sound, and Charley lays out to Sylvia the details of the money he intends to make and save, because "yo'r parents may look for something better for yo', my pretty" (182), making explicit the equation of Sylvia's sexuality and monetary value. That Sylvia is a chattel even in her romance with Charley is brought home by Daniel's reaction to her news: "he turned and struck his broad horny palm into Kinraid's with the air of concluding a bargain.... He wound up with a chuckle, as the thought struck him that this great piece of business, of disposing of their only child, had been concluded while his wife was away" (184). As this is taking place, Sylvia is too embarrassed to come back downstairs, so the men are left to celebrate the bargain on their own. That the up-till-now fully self-determined and active Sylvia is temporarily paralyzed by her own consent to marry Charley and her father's knowing of it indicates the discomfort in the situation, in spite of Sylvia's genuine desire to be with Charley.

The ominous undertone reminding the reader that Sylvia is a sexual object, bought and sold, continues in the disturbing scene where she explains her desperation to Kester while Philip whistles for her to come to him from across the field: "she heard a soft, low whistle, and... there was her lover and affianced husband, leaning on the gate and gazing into the field with passionate eyes, devouring the fair face and figure of her, his future wife" (298). Lansbury very appropriately deems this image "the obscene assertion of Hepburn's authority and Sylvia's resigned revulsion" (97). In neither of her romances does Sylvia have real agency; the difference with Charley is that she is happy with the bargain because her own attraction and desire are involved. When she learns that Charley has married someone else, after he has discovered that she is married to Philip and is the mother of his child, and will not run away with Charley, her faith in men and what they stand for receives its final blow. Sylvia brings up to Hester Hester's own stymied love for Philip, and when Alice tries to quiet her by saying "thou'rt speaking like a

marry, however, Jeremiah Foster makes Hester his inheritor after all (377). It is simply a matter of time before the patient Hester's right is acknowledged.

silly child,” Sylvia replies, “No. I’m speaking like a woman; like a woman as finds out she’s been cheated by men as she trusted, and as has no help for it” (402). Being betrayed by the men they necessarily depend on here appears as a prerequisite of womanhood. Sylvia’s forgiveness of Philip in the end grows out of her feeling of being betrayed by Charley, which she decides confirms Philip’s suspicions and justifies his interference: “Thou thought as he was faithless and fickle... and so he were. He were married to another woman not so many weeks at all after thou went away” (449). Her logic does not quite add up, because if Philip had not lied Sylvia would have waited and Charley would have found her single when he returned, and married her. Philip is all she has left to put her faith in, however, and she does, asking for his forgiveness. While her self is invested in different men, Sylvia has no option but to put her faith in masculine authority. The ways in which both men fail her underlines the failure of a system of belief which limits the spiritual and economic agency of womankind.

With her oath to no longer act as Philip’s wife, and to never forgive him for ruining her life, Sylvia brings about a time of respite where she, her daughter, Alice, and Hester live happily under their own agency, outside of the dictates of male authority. The ending which brings Philip’s return and Sylvia’s regret of that oath, however, undermines the sense of self-sufficiency achieved. Philip’s spiritual evolution is not matched in Sylvia’s, which only teaches her that the men that she relies on are culpable and fallible, but her only option is to love them and have faith in them anyway. In making the oath that drives Philip from the house, Sylvia also rejects Charley, deciding for herself that she and her daughter Bella will be independent. Importantly, the vow that she takes is for the sake of her spirituality, which she sees is dependent on her sexuality: “I’ll make my vow now, lest I lose mysel’ again. I’ll never forgive yon man, nor live with him as his wife again.... He’s spoilt my life... but neither yo’ nor him shall spoil my soul” (348). This is Sylvia at her most determined, and at her most overtly religious, as she recognizes that to continue being Philip’s wife is hypocritical and as sinful as becoming Charley’s lover. In her passionately angry state, she refuses both positions and rejects her role as chattel for the sake of her soul. Sylvia takes control of her body in order to get control of her soul, as she realises that she cannot depend on Philip’s sense of what is right and wrong. She continues to defy the traditionally feminine role when, after her mother’s death, she insists on going to the funeral¹¹² and “No one could do more than remonstrate; no one had sufficient authority to interfere with

¹¹² See my note 55, pg. 54.

her” (363). With no mother, and especially no husband, Sylvia is liberated to act as she sees fit. Sylvia’s financial independence is a little more complicated, but things have changed since the Fosters first decided to give their shop to their male clerks, and since Hester has defied expectations and married neither of the clerks, her “interest in the shop was by this time acknowledged... she had a right to be considered as a kind of partner” (377). Sylvia’s services are needed to “be a gentle and tender companion to Alice Rose when her own daughter would necessarily be engaged in the shop” (377). This plan is conceived of by the Fosters, and Sylvia is still using Philip’s money from his shares in the shop for her own and her child’s maintenance, but in caring for Alice she is also making an essential contribution to her new immediate family and, by freeing Hester to work, to the shop that her income depends upon. Her occupation and busyness returns Sylvia to something like the happiness she felt on her father’s farm, in contrast with “the enforced idleness of a lady’s life” (Lansbury 97) that she had been experiencing as Philip’s wife. Schor finds “Sylvia in a world composed entirely of women and feminised men, a world in which she and her daughter find a peace that is missing from the rest of the novel” (171), which finally allows her to evolve on her own terms to come temporarily to a place similar to the one Philip finally achieves. Along with her new independence and resolve to give her daughter all the love she has so that she “shall niver need a feyther’s” (376), Sylvia benefits from Alice’s principled religion, as well as her lessons in reading, and from Hester’s shining example of goodness and patience, both qualities that Philip wished to teach her but was unable to.

Though Sylvia claims she is not quite happy, there is an undeniable sense of harmony in the life she leads when she is living on her own terms under her own authority, which is destroyed as Philip’s own harmony is restored. Philip sees her for the first time since his return “holding a child, a merry, dancing child, up in her arms.... She too, Sylvia, was laughing for pleasure, and for sympathy with pleasure” (425). Philip notes “her bonny careless looks, her pretty, matronly form, her evident ease of mind and prosperous outward circumstances” (425), comparing her state with his own poor and unhappy one. At this moment, Sylvia does appear to have it all. Philip’s return and subsequent unveiling and death remove all that bonny carelessness from Sylvia’s life, so that people remember her afterwards as “a pale, sad woman, allays dressed in black” (454). As Philip is redeemed by his return and Sylvia’s forgiveness, Sylvia’s new life is shattered and she guiltily reverts to her dependence on male authority. This time it is slightly

removed in that it is dependence on God's forgiveness, but a dependence that is convoluted through a sense of shame for her own sin regarding the way she has treated Philip, who by virtue only of his position as her husband, deserved better. While his spiritual redemption is apparent by the time he dies at the end, hers is much less certain. When Sylvia goes in to see Philip on his death bed, understanding that the townspeople now judge her for "living in ease and comfort while her husband's shelter was little better than a hovel" (447), she is described as "spirit-like... white, noiseless, and upborne from earth" (448). The circumstances of her reunion with Philip make her ghostly and insubstantial. Philip asks for her forgiveness for his "cruel wrong," imploring Sylvia to "speak one word of love to me – one little word, that I may know I have thy pardon" (448). She does, and he dies believing "God is very merciful" (449) and that he is going to heaven. For her part, though, Sylvia too has a sin on her conscience because of the oath that she made that temporarily freed her: "Them were wicked, wicked words, as I said; and a wicked vow as I vowed, and the Lord God Almighty has ta'en me at my word. I'm sorely punished, Philip, I am indeed" (448-9). Philip's death is Sylvia's punishment, as her promise never to live with him as his wife again is made irrevocable. Sylvia worries that she "shall go among them as gnash their teeth for iver, while yo' are where all tears are wiped away" (449). Though Philip tries to comfort her with thoughts of God's mercy, and dies with a "bright smile" (453) on his face, Sylvia is left to devote herself to him, not to turn entirely or hopefully to God. The last words she utters in the novel are to ask Hester, "If I live very long, and try hard to be very good all that time, do yo' think... as God will let me to him where he is?" (454). The reader very shortly learns that Sylvia "died before her daughter was well grown up" (454 – 5), denying at least the first stipulation of the condition. Sylvia's role as Philip's wife is inextricably intertwined with her spiritual life. The physical / sexual aspect of that role is also important to the way the story ends, as Sylvia uses physical affection to portray her forgiveness and to try to obtain his and God's. In forgiving Philip "she kissed his poor burnt lips; she held him in her arms" (453), and Hester comes in to find Sylvia with Philip's body, "lying by him, her hand holding his, her other thrown around him" (453). Sylvia has to commit herself to physically loving Philip, as she does to rationally loving him because he was right about Charley's infidelity. Philip's scars and burns make her ability to love him the more noble. The story ends with Philip's redeeming death and Sylvia's hope to earn God's mercy so that she can, in heaven, be with the husband she never really wanted to be with on earth. Philip has learned the lesson that as a man he must take control

and responsibility of his own actions, and that his love for his wife must be moderated by his love for God. Sylvia has learned what her mother believed all along – that a married woman must love and believe in her husband in order to have a relationship with God. In spite of her pretensions toward agency, Sylvia's spirituality is curtailed by the limits of Philip's faith.

The apparently conventional gender and religious message of this ending is further problematized, however, by the brief but interesting episode that follows, which sets the reader up to question everything that has come before it, but most specifically the immediately preceding scene of Philip's death. While critics who take the religious message of the novel at face value, like Pollard or Wright, for example, ignore the final ending paragraphs entirely, others have more to say. Schor notes both that "the end of the novel forces on us a self-consciousness, if not a scepticism, about storytelling, and the story we have read" (177), and that the questions asked about a woman by a woman, regarding the details of an old tale about a good man abandoned by his wife, suggest "Gaskell ... may be asking.. where are the stories of women, the stories they must learn to tell (for) themselves" (180). To move beyond the moralizing of the death scene to this questioning of how the story is remembered by "popular feeling and ignorance of the real facts" (454) moves the focus away from spiritual consequences to popular ones, and then to fictional ones. Sylvia's ultimate devotion to finding her way to heaven, to be back with Philip and make up for her earthly neglect of him does not matter because people do not remember it anyway. Thus *Sylvia's Lovers* really ends with the pointlessness of Sylvia's lesson learned. Her fate and destiny are set for her, unlike Philip's, not by God but by the pressures and expectations of society. The critical consensus that *Sylvia's Lovers* is a gloomy and depressing story is perhaps unavoidable because of the dissatisfying ending and the realisation that when Philip finds spiritual comfort, Sylvia loses the earthly comfort that she had gained. Gaskell's tale seems to attempt to present a relatively straightforward moral in the cases of both Philip and Sylvia, in that proper devotion to God above all else is the true route to fulfillment. How to interpret and interact with authority, both earthly and divine, becomes a problem for both man and woman, however. Gaskell is able to solve the problem quite neatly in Philip's case, by having him eventually learn to truly love God rather than to idolize Sylvia. Having Sylvia instead learn to truly love her husband is much less effective, since the reader has been conditioned by the story to see Sylvia as a victim of the circumstance of her gender and the failures of the men around her, and to celebrate her as a self-determined agent whose happiness is rooted in the

beauty of life and the here and now. The story is wrapped up quickly after Philip dies, for, just as the obedient wife Sylvia is no longer interesting to her husband who longs for the relief of experiencing her true nature again, there is no interest in showing the Sylvia who is devoted to loving him in death, and the reader is instead left with the impressions of the female visitor who learns the tale.

While Gaskell may have intended to say no more about faith and religion than that it must not be taken lightly or hypocritically, through her keen focus on the economic situation that leads to Sylvia's sacrifice of her agency, and how economic dependence leads her into social and spiritual dependence on the husband she never wished to marry in the first place, she ends up revealing a consciousness of the potential tragedy of any religious faith, Unitarianism included, that restricts devotion to God or translates devotion to God to devotion to husband. Even if gender roles are only earthly, and in heaven souls are genderless and equal, the social limits upon faith based on sex evident in *Sylvia's Lovers* mean that Sylvia's road to redemption is harder than Philip's, because it is only because of his faults that she needs to take it at all. The disappointing ending is the only way that Sylvia can go to heaven, but it is so unfulfilling that the final storyteller coda is necessary to excuse it to an extent. At the end Gaskell seems to step back and say this is what society demands of womankind – all that can be done is to tell the story. When masculine agency is curtailed, as it is by the press gang, Daniel's hanging, and Philip's lie, the consequences are effected upon women. In *Sylvia's Lovers* religious authority is made problematic by misinterpretation and selfish use, but most significantly by the need for it to apply equally to both genders. Agency is proved to be an essential part of proper religious belief and practice, but married women are limited in that they cannot be both agents and obedient wives. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell is at her most pessimistic about the dangers of social expectations and limits of gender roles, and even heaven seems barely to make up for the unfair trials that women like Sylvia suffer on earth.

In "Lois the Witch" (1859), one of Gaskell's strangest stories, she uses the shock value of the Puritan witch trials to more overtly question the dangerous combination of religious zealotry and freedom with sexual desire and jealousy. Relatively close to *Sylvia's Lovers* in the chronology of Gaskell's fiction, "Lois" is also similar, as Wright argues, in its historical setting and that in both works a "strong interest in morbid psychology is revealed, associated with superstition" (164). This superstition is, as Wright points out, another aspect of religion, and

he claims “Gaskell faces, and reflects, the harsh unloving world of Puritanism with which her own Unitarianism had a common ancestry. She sees it as a perversion of true Christianity in its rejection of mercy and love” (169). Rebecca Styler argues that “Lois” is a thoroughly Unitarian story in its critique of Calvinism and celebration of “the Unitarian ideals of rational religion and universal benevolence” (73), as well as in the narrative style of the piece, which requires the reader to “induce natural principles of cause and effect” just as Unitarian theology does (82). While the prejudice towards Unitarian doctrine is certainly an important aspect of the work, the underlying concern with the perversion of religion in connection with sexual and gender relations is another key to understanding the story. In “Lois” Gaskell makes a strong case against non-authorized and personal religious practices precisely because they allow the selfish to interfere with the spiritual. The story betrays the anxiety that a faith can be manipulated by both its leaders and its followers, by both men and women who are dissatisfied, confused, or lustful. However, unlike in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Gaskell can offer a genuine promise of heavenly redemption for Lois, because she does not give in and sacrifice her religious beliefs in a marriage that is not for love.

That the Puritan faith is susceptible to the personal foibles and desires of its leaders is first made evident as Lois, the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, sits down to her first dinner in New England in the Puritan household of the kindly Widow Smith. She is surprised by all the exotic food placed on the table, but disappointed that “all was cool, not to say cold, before Elder Hawkins... had finished his grace, into which was embodied thanksgiving for the past, and prayers for the future, lives of every individual present, adapted to their several cases, as far as the elder could guess at them from appearances” (117). This humorous downside of extempore prayer and belief, because the elder is limited by nothing except his own sense of what needs to be said, becomes much more serious and sinister once Lois enters the home of her unkind aunt, Grace Hickson, and rouses the interest of her cousin Manasseh, who conflates his spiritual beliefs and personal desires to an extreme that makes Philip Hepburn’s lie seem rather tame in comparison. After Lois refuses his initial proposal of marriage, Manasseh reveals to her that it is not simply his wish, but her destiny: “It is borne in upon me – verily, I see it as in a vision – that thou must be my spouse, and no other man’s. Thou cannot escape what is fore-doomed” (145). Manasseh clearly believes in the divinity of visions, though it comes out by the end of the story that he is mentally unbalanced enough that even his proud mother and the highly susceptible

Puritan community admit it. His more earthly motivations are clear to the reader and to Lois herself, however, as she feels physically threatened by his presence and his persistence. The problem is compounded by the fact that in spite of his insanity, after his father dies Manasseh is the undisputed head of the household. The narrator explains just how difficult it is for Lois to resist him given the circumstances, “living in the heavy, monotonous routine of a family with one man for head, and this man esteemed a hero by most of those around him, simply because he was the only man in the family” (147). In the absence of someone to tell him what to do and what to believe, Manasseh can choose to believe what will fulfill his own desires. However, Manasseh’s power by right of gender only extends to his own household, for when he tries to save Lois from punishment for witchcraft by rationally explaining the prophecy he has seen, his mother admits that he is mad in order to save him from charges of heresy. With no officially sanctioned limits, religion can become so personal that it grows harmful to people whose desires are different. Manasseh believes in his own authority but has no way to judge if he is right because there are no standards. His madness appears to stem from a lack of distinction between himself and his own desires, and God.

While Manasseh’s selfish misuse of religion can be excused at least partially by his madness, that of his mother and sisters is more dangerous because it is, by degrees, more conscious. By extending the misuse of faith to women in “Lois,” Gaskell shows how irrational belief can be a form of agency for those who are otherwise disempowered, but that selfishly used it turns to evil. Grace’s false piousness for the sake of her reputation in the community, and Prudence’s apparently falsified fits and accusations¹¹³ contribute to Lois’s downfall and death, but the more significant sin and betrayal comes from Grace’s older daughter, Faith, whose motives are distinctly sexual and whose knowledge of the evil she is doing is apparent throughout. Just as her mother’s and sister’s personalities are the opposite of the qualities their names suggest, Faith has no faith in her community’s Christianity, evident in her hatred of the elder pastor who ousts the young pastor whom she loves, and her keen interest in both the Indian servant Nattee’s sorcery and Lois’s tales of Halloween superstitions at home in England. What Faith does have is an unrequited passion for Pastor Nolan, and a hatred for Lois when she discovers that Nolan appears to prefer her. Realizing that her beloved likes Lois better, Faith

¹¹³ Prudence’s fake bewitching is brought on by her envy of another young girl who gets the attention of the town for her fits. Prudence wonders “how long I might wriggle, before great and godly folk would take so much notice of me” (168).

conceals evidence that might save one innocent's life and put a stop to the witch hunt, and begins encouraging her sister's fancy that Lois could be a witch. Faith's countenance reveals her motivations, for her smile is "a deadly smile" (180), and "a bad and wicked smile" (181).¹¹⁴ Faith is aware of the ways in which religious beliefs are being manipulated in the town, and she joins in with her own desire to punish and be rid of her rival Lois, not caring that what she does is wrong. Faith combines the power she has over her suggestive sister and bloodthirsty community with a somewhat incongruous defeatist attitude. Having failed to save another accused witch by withholding evidence, "Faith went a deadlier pale than she had been, and said, sighing, "Poor Hota! But death is best"" (181). Faith has given up on the concept of pleasure or happiness on earth, and so uses the only power that she has at her disposal essentially to commit murder. Manasseh runs off after Lois's death, and both Grace and Prudence repent for their part in the witch hunt later on, but Faith simply disappears from the story. She is a character who purposefully perverts the religion of her family and community out of sexual jealousy, but she is the agent of her own desires, and her repentance or denial would undermine that agency. Faith is Gaskell's proof that religious practice that favours emotions and that allows just enough authority to end up in the hearts and minds of the ignorant, selfish, evil, and human, without checks and balances is dangerous.

In spite of the irrational persecution, Lois herself remains rational, sensible, and practical throughout the story, which allows her to maintain her own faith in love and kindness as the true manifestations of God's will. During Manasseh's fit of insanity, she "by simple questions on practical affairs... led him back, in her unconscious wisdom, to the subjects upon which he had always shown practical sense" (173). Lois grounds her own and even her visionary cousin's belief in the rational and the logical. She responds to Manasseh's proposal with steady confidence in her own belief system, saying "I do not acknowledge it to be the Lord's will" (145) and persisting in the face of his persistence by pointing out that to her there is a difference between imagination and divine prophesy: "I may take a dream to be the truth, and hear my own fancies, if I think about them too long. But I cannot marry anyone from obedience" (146). Lois's ability to cling to the rational and logical while the people around her cannot is essential to the way that she deals with her trial and incarceration, for if Lois was to admit to the sin of witchcraft, she

¹¹⁴ Faith's evil nature is shown to spring from human sources, as Gaskell uses the death of Faith's father to reveal that Faith "had a warm heart, hidden away somewhere under her moody exterior" (141). Faith's good character is shown to be suppressed because of her mother's clear preference for her other two children.

herself would be culpable for fuelling the hysteria. At her lowest point she sits alone in her cell wondering if she has had evil thoughts that might somehow “have had devilish power given to them by the father of evil, and all unconsciously to herself, have gone forth as active curses into the world” (192). The power of suggestion is overcome by Lois’s recognition of the iron weight attached to her leg, meant to keep her from flying away: “Why, the utter, ridiculous impossibility of the thing convinced her of her own innocence and ignorance of all supernatural power” (192). Lois has the ability to reason about matters of faith and belief, and while she recognises the suggestive power of a person’s own imagination and desires, because she comes from a tradition that excludes the personal from religious practice, she can maintain the separation between her own will and God’s will. Thus, Lois is able to find comfort in “saying all the blessed words she could remember” (204) and in teaching Nattee, her fellow convicted witch, about the kindness and love of Christ. She has a standard outside of herself to turn to and so is able to reap the rewards of rational faith in the face of the irrational. The lesson in “Lois the Witch” is that too much personal, selfish involvement in one’s religious practices causes evil, and that not only rationality, but regulation, is necessary to prevent it. Without a strict authority guiding them, men and women cannot be trusted to know or understand God’s will when their own desires so easily get in the way.

Throughout these three works, Gaskell maintains an interest in the intersection of gender and religious practice, and in the gap between personal agency as a means to spiritual fulfillment and the gendered expectations of the earthly world. Together, the works display Gaskell’s concern with the idea of freedom under the authority of God and the different rules of different religions, and with how both genders struggle with agency when it comes to matters of faith. Her tendency is naturally to push for Unitarian-style rationalism and tolerance, but conflicts still arise in that even within that system there are limits on the spiritual agency that women can have. In “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” she suggests that single women can find both an earthly and a religious or holy purpose in choosing to act for the comfort of others. Religious imagery that suggests biblical themes but also diverges from the specifics of them shows that interpretation is subjective, and that it is the motivation behind actions that is truly important. The story also implies that it is because Libbie will never have a husband that she is free to make the moral choices that she does and find fulfillment through hard work instead. In *Sylvia’s Lovers* Gaskell uses Phillip’s story to show the necessity of religious responsibility and the importance of

claiming agency in one's spiritual and moral life. Philip learns that feelings and actions are what matters, not talk or appearances. Sylvia's story, on the other hand, reveals the pessimistic irony that even women who are naturally inclined toward such agency are limited by the men they depend on because of social and economic realities. *Sylvia's Lovers* is conflicted by a desire to present true religious feeling as a means to peace and happiness, as it is in "Libbie Marsh," and a recognition that the Christian Biblical ideal of the division of moral and spiritual authority between the sexes prevents women from acting on such true religious feeling as they might have. In "Lois the Witch," Gaskell is freer, because there is a distinct distance between her own religion and the extreme Puritanism that her characters practice, to condemn the religious belief system as perpetrator of bad actions and unfair treatment and punishments. "Lois" takes religious responsibility to the extreme, and suggests that the personal interpretation of divine authority can be dangerous as well, especially when sexual desire is involved. In this story, Gaskell argues for the importance of both authoritative standards and rationality in religious belief, in order to limit the power of the individual – power that Gaskell shows can be harmful in the hands of men and women whose only means of agency is to prey on this false belief. Lois has to die rather than marry her cousin, in order to maintain her pure and principled relationship with God instead of becoming complicit in his hypocritical one. "Lois" crystallises the problem that Gaskell approaches in *Sylvia's Lovers*, the difficulty of female spiritual agency when material needs, human desires, and social expectations interfere.

The change that Gaskell's thinking undergoes as she moves from the optimistic "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" to the doubt and tragedy of *Sylvia's Lovers* and "Lois the Witch" may be partially related to anxieties about her own daughters. During the late 1850s and early 1860s Gaskell was wondering what her daughters might do if they remained unmarried, writing to Charles Norton in 1860 that "My girls... *are* such comforts... Everyone so good & healthy & bright. I don't know what I should do if any one of them married; & yet it is constantly a wonder to me that no-one ever gives them a chance" (*Letters* 598). Marianne, the eldest, would have been twenty-six years old at the time.¹¹⁵ Anxieties about the girls remaining single mingled with worries that they might marry unhappily, for Gaskell's second daughter Meta was engaged to a

¹¹⁵ Marianne was engaged to her second cousin Thurstan Holland in 1861 after a long and somewhat secret courtship. The romance was not approved of by their families because neither of the two would bring much money to the marriage (Uglow 486) but Gaskell was fond of Holland and reconciled to the marriage. Florence Gaskell married when she was twenty one, in 1863.

Captain Charles Hill in 1858 but ended the engagement due to fears that he was not entirely honest with her. Both she and her youngest sister Julia never married, but devoted their lives to good works in Manchester (Uglow 447), to an extent living out the kind of life that Gaskell imagined in Libbie Marsh and Hester Rose. Watching her daughters struggle with questions of whom to marry, if anyone, and how to negotiate their lives in terms of love, economic concerns, faith and trust may well have influenced the trepidations about the pitfalls of sexual attraction that are apparent in *Sylvia's Lovers* and "Lois," both of which were written during this period. While she attempts to separate religious feeling and spiritual comfort from the concerns of the world by presenting heaven as the ultimate place of reconciliation, Gaskell also shows how economic dependence must lead to spiritual dependence for women. When it comes to religion, which should be the realm in which each person can exercise his or her own agency most freely, and which should provide comfort, the relationship between gender and agency becomes the most complex and problematic, and Gaskell struggles to reconcile the actions of the individual with the concept of higher authority, frustrated by the hierarchy of God, man, and then woman. Only in "Libbie Marsh" can Gaskell present a free and clear moral about the equation between purpose and holiness, because only Libbie, by means of her lack of value on the economic marriage market, is disempowered enough to claim her own power. In *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, her two novels which focus most explicitly on middle-class marriage, matchmaking, and spinsterhood, Gaskell comes to terms more completely and more optimistically with the kind of agency women have on and off that market.

Chapter Four

“Bewildering helplessness”: The Agency of Gender Construction in *Cranford*, “A Fear for the Future,” and *Wives and Daughters*

Gaskell's short novel *Cranford* (1853), her short story “A Fear for the Future” (1858), and her final novel *Wives and Daughters* (1864) are all specifically concerned with gender. *Cranford* presents tales of a town that is inhabited almost exclusively by women, “A Fear for the Future” is an exasperated polemic, from the perspective of an old-fashioned man, about changing definitions of womanhood, and *Wives and Daughter* is a female *Bildungsroman* in which a young woman discovers her own identity and sorts out how to relate to the societal expectations that surround her and the man that she loves. The subtitle of *Wives and Daughters*, “An Every Day Story,” is an accurate description of each of these works, but the negotiation of gender and how it is constructed and used in the everyday lives of the characters allows for Gaskell's most in-depth analysis of the power and agency associated with it. The decidedly domestic settings of *Cranford*, “A Fear for the Future,” and *Wives and Daughters* are congenial forums for Gaskell's interrogation of feminine power as it is expected to function, in the realm in which it is expected to exist. In many ways the other works I have discussed set feminine agency against masculine, and do so in situations and institutions that are conventionally under the control of men. When feminine means are effectively used in these situations, the result is that traditional masculine authority is questioned, but with the caveat that it is limited by the situation or institution in ways that the feminine is not. The home and local community and society are the places in which women's powers of care, sympathy, and passive influence are expected to be utilized, and so in these works feminine agency does not have the same result of being surprisingly effective juxtaposed with masculine inability to act within its own realm. Rather, feminine agency and the ways in which it is created and expected to work are dissected more critically. In these cases the concern is not with the power to change the conditions of class antagonism or of social, moral or religious hypocrisy, but rather with the agency of the management of domestic life, personal and social psychological wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships. Importantly, these three works are concerned with middle-class characters and with the values and anxieties that Gaskell herself would have encountered. In thus facing head on questions of gender and power in the social realm that she herself occupied, Gaskell can come to challenging and authentic conclusions, ones that allow for the complexity of a situation that she thoroughly understood. Gaskell argues that

gender roles are social constructs and useful ones in creating balance both in the domestic world and in society on a broader scale. In psychological terms, she suggests they are essential in creating a sense of identity, but essential too is an awareness of the fact that they are constructs, that they are mutable, and that they can be challenged and transcended when necessary. Ultimately, Gaskell's argument is for a compromise, one that values both masculinity and femininity by upholding a sense of the utility of each gender as well as the perceived differences between them.

Gaskell's discussion of gender in these works contributes to the ongoing debate over whether gender is essential and innate, or socially and culturally constructed. I use the term "constructed" interchangeably with terms that would be more familiar to Gaskell, such as "imagined," "expected," or even "false," because of its predominance in feminist discourse today, and because the concept it describes is one that Gaskell was familiar with, as the idea of the social construction of gender was one that existed in Gaskell's time, and, I will argue, in her thinking. Challenges to essentialist doctrine that proclaimed masculinity and femininity inherent and natural to men and women were perhaps most thoroughly articulated in ideas concerning the kind of education that women received, from such proponents as Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Ellis, Harriet Martineau, and John Stuart Mill.¹¹⁶ In *Cranford* Gaskell interrogates humorously the different categories of masculine and feminine to point out how both genders can derive power from the idea of masculine strength and authority in opposition to feminine weakness. Secrecy and subversion, as well as kindness, imagination, and social awareness, become the means by which traditional conceptions of power are undermined at the same time as they are upheld. "A Fear for the Future" also uses humour to point to the different ideals and expectations that men and women hold in a world that is changing. It questions which gender has more power, arguing ultimately, and without irony, that the false dichotomy of an authoritative gender and an officially powerless one is necessary for human attraction and relationships. *Wives and*

¹¹⁶ The concept is articulated in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a work which Gaskell knew. Uglow points out that most "Unitarians disapproved of Wollstonecraft's life, but saw the sense of her words" (32). Gaskell refers to her specifically in a letter of 1848, in which she teasingly suggests of "a pretty naïve little ballad" that her correspondent "may adopt a sentence out of Mary Wollstonecraft to this air" (*Letters* 57), presumably mocking both the chauvinism of the ballad and the idea of subjecting it to feminist critique. In 1822 Martineau argues that there "is proof sufficient to my mind, that there is no natural deficiency of power, that, unless proper objects are supplied to women to employ their faculties, their energies are exerted improperly" (82). In his essay "On the Subjection of Women" (1869) Mill speaks of the "social subordination of women" and claims that what "is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others" (324).

Daughters applies the concept of the feminine power of passive attraction, influence, and charm specifically to the lives of women on the marriage market, negotiating the gap between empowerment and a sense of genuine identity. *Wives and Daughters* complicates the innocuous utility of gender construction by suggesting both the attraction and the potential for ruin inherent in gaining agency through passive means. Each of the works ridicules certain notions and expectations of masculinity and femininity, but recognises potential and value in the constructs as well.

Cranford points to its concern with gender roles by announcing at the beginning that it excludes men entirely. The novel is a series of episodes that take place in a small English village, which is famously “in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women” (5), and it is with these unlikely amazons – poor but genteel middle-aged spinsters and widows, who abhor, or pretend to abhor, men – that the story has to do. In creating a story that revolves around middle-aged, unmarried women, Gaskell is participating in the contemporary discussion about the role that such women could and should play in their society.¹¹⁷ Various schemes to take care of these “redundant” or “superfluous” women included everything from suggesting they emigrate to the colonies where there were more men and therefore more opportunities for marriage, to the formation of charitable sisterhoods which could put women’s nurturing instincts to work caring for the poor and the sick, to encouraging them in professions of their own where they would no longer depend on men for their livelihood. The debate over old maids goes to the heart of the debate over woman’s role in general, and whether her destiny must always be tied to marriage and family or whether there were other means by which she could live a fulfilling life. The critical debate that surrounds *Cranford* concerns where it falls in this argument and whether the reader can ultimately take the appellation of Amazon¹¹⁸ seriously, as denoting women who hold power. That is, are the spinsters and widows of *Cranford* proto-feminist heroines, independent of men and defiant of the traditional marriage plot, or is

¹¹⁷ See Auerbach’s chapter on “Old Maids and the Wish for Wings” (109-149) in *Woman and the Demon* for a thorough discussion of the cultural and literary representations of and reactions to the idea of the unmarried woman. More recently, Lisa Niles discusses *Cranford* in terms of Gaskell reworking the social codes of “population studies, political economy, medicine, and conduct literature... in order to give them new powers of signification for older women” (294).

¹¹⁸ References cited in the OED suggest that in the mid-nineteenth century the term suggested connotations of masculinity as well as of strength. The idea that the Amazons of myth were polyandrous and sexually virile contrasts humorously with the unmarried ladies of *Cranford*. In any event, Gaskell’s application of the term to her *Cranfordians* is ironic, foregrounding how very different they are from the Amazons. The question is whether there are similarities as well.

their independence a sham and an object of the book's satire, unsustainable without reverting back finally to the conventions of male authority and a sense of the traditional family as the only means by which a woman can find true fulfillment. Edgar Wright suggests that with *Cranford* Gaskell "gives up... the attempt to deal with the 'big' problems and broad issues, and paradoxically universalises her work by restricting it to the individual problems of life in a small community" (118). While practically all of them agree that in creating a village that is, nominally at least, exclusively female, Gaskell is commenting on gender roles, expectations, and abilities, some critics find the overall message much more progressively feminist than do others. Nina Auerbach insists on "the stability and strength that accompany Cranford's genteel destitution" (*Communities* 79), and that finally, in "the verbal and commercial battle of nineteenth-century England, the cooperative female community defeats the warrior world that proclaims itself the real one" (87). Coral Lansbury reads *Cranford* as a Utopia, but one that embraces and promotes "the fiction that the everyday world can always be transformed into a more wholesome and entertaining reality by the powers of imagination and feeling" (76), powers that prove to exist in the everyday world. Rowena Fowler argues that with her resilient amazons, Gaskell succeeds in "imagining a particularly female kind of strength and power which is not just an imitation of male competitiveness, aggression, or egomania" (728) and Elizabeth Langland posits that "the complex signifying practices of the Cranford ladies... in which they are creating meaning rather than slavishly following rigid social formulas" (123) is "Gaskell's humorous revision of a domestic ideology which dictated a man's concerns and comfort as a woman's chief occupation" (124).¹¹⁹ My reading locates the empowering of the feminine recognized by these critics specifically in the idea that it is less powerful than the masculine.

The other side of the debate sees *Cranford* as entirely nostalgic, Utopian and aware of its own impracticality, or as a failed attempt at proving that women are superior to men. Arthur Pollard concludes that *Cranford* "is an elegy, an account of time past and of a fleeting, unimportant present. It is a book of old people, with no significant future" (73). Martin Dodsworth reads it as a "tidied dream, in which Mrs. Gaskell's unconscious hostility to the male struggles with her awareness of the pointlessness of such hostility in the predominantly masculine society of her day" (138). Patsy Stoneman sees the female society of *Cranford* as

¹¹⁹ While she appreciates the feminist vision at work here, Langland argues that feminine authority comes at the expense of class equality, and that middle-class women gain some of their power through the subjection of the working-class women that they control.

defeated, suggesting that critics and readers “do no service to women by ignoring the extent to which Miss Matty and the others have been diminished as human beings by the constraints of femininity” (60), and Audrey Jaffe argues that *Cranford* is “the manifestation of anxiety about the power wielded by men in Victorian culture in general” (50) and that it suggests “that the granting of a dominant role to women is imaginable – even in fiction – only on fictional terms” (47). Caroline Huber sums up the problems with reading *Cranford* as an emphatically feminist text: “The radical message that *Cranford* seems at first to promise turns out... to be somewhat ambiguous. Gaskell’s lack of commitment to an idea whose revolutionary nature she may only have vaguely recognized, her reluctance to shock and alarm¹²⁰ her readers, and the pressure of conventional novel closure on the very concerns that she seemed at the outset to celebrate... prevent *Cranford* from joining the ranks of feminist literature” (48). I suggest that Gaskell does recognize that there is both something very arbitrary and something very powerful in gender roles. Her playful interrogation of them admits both their fluidity and their utility. My reading of *Cranford* posits that the radical move is in recognising the power inherent in the traditionally feminine position of subordination to masculine strength in a realm that allows for a different kind of perspective on authority. It is not a Utopian vision of female dominance, but a recognition of feminine power as different from masculine and that each is dependent on its expectations of the other. In *Cranford*, Gaskell makes middle-class gender roles the overt subject of the novel, reflecting on their constructed nature and mutability while insisting on their value, especially from the perspective of the feminine.

Gaskell presents a town that proudly insists women have power, and reveals that power through humour and sympathy. The story is narrated by a Miss Mary Smith, a younger visitor to Cranford who comes and goes between her father’s house in the nearby industrial town of Drumble and the Cranford home of Miss Matty, the fifty-something heroine of the story and epitome of feminine timidity, ignorance, and selfless devotion to others. Mary’s position between Drumble and Cranford evokes Gaskell’s own – living in Manchester and visiting her own older, female friends and relations in Knutsford, where she grew up. It also positions the reader in a perspective that invites us to judge ourselves as we judge Cranford. With Mary as our guide, we are both identified with the ladies and marginalised from their perspective, which

¹²⁰ Huber suggests that the negative response to *Ruth*, which included burning the book in some cases, may have made Gaskell unwilling to offend any more of her readers’ sensibilities.

allows us distance to see what they do not. Eileen Gillooly reads Mary's humorous tone as defensive, "expressing the pain of its narrator's marginal perspective" (884). However, Hilary Schor sees Mary moving between two perspectives, that of "the removed ethnographer" (86), and that of "the daughter of Cranford" (87). This is what Patricia Ingham similarly identifies as Mary's "double role as commentator and communal biographer" (xx). Mary's humour is always directed at herself as well as at the ladies of Cranford, so that while it undermines their authority it also empowers through identification. Much of the humour in *Cranford* arises from Mary's evaluations of the town and its inhabitants, but it is made less aggressive because she regularly shifts to include herself amongst their number. For example, discussing the "phraseology of Cranford," she explains "economy was always 'elegant', and money-spending always 'vulgar and ostentatious', a sort of sour-grapism, which made us feel very peaceful and satisfied" (8). Mary begins on the outside, as a translator, but once she gets to the point, that elegant economy is a euphemism to make the poor residents feel superior, she speaks of "us," including herself in any ridicule. She makes the shift from them to we, or us, consistently throughout the book. Thus, Mary is also the object of her own jokes. The satirical tone that Mary sometimes takes, that might otherwise challenge the sincerity of her admiration for the ladies, is contradicted by her willingness to laugh at herself along with *Cranford*, and suggests that the reader is meant to do the same. As we giggle at anything, we participate in subverting authority, or taking power in a subversive way, but as we sympathise, we reinstate the right to dignity. Thus the confusion over the ladies as the object of jokes or the objects of sympathy itself begins to suggest the nature of power. Furthermore, while the ladies of Cranford are in many ways worlds apart from the image of the female warrior, they are shown to be entirely effective and capable in running a town without men. As Mary points out to begin with, there is no need for men: "What could they do if they were there?" (5). For everything that needs doing "the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient" (5). From the first line, Gaskell creates a sense of the incongruity and thus absurdity of women, especially older spinsters and widows, presuming to the heights of warrior-like strength, but also embraces that incongruity.

The two men that do figure regularly in Cranford are Mr. Hoggins, whom the ladies are proud of as "a very clever surgeon" though "as a man – or rather... as a gentleman – we could only shake our heads over his name and himself" (123) and Mr. Hayter the Rector, who is "as afraid of matrimonial reports getting abroad about him as any girl of eighteen" (105) and keeps

himself well guarded, through his charity to his National School boys who “clung round him as if he had been the queen bee and they the swarm” (106). These two men perform professional functions¹²¹ in Cranford, and so are accepted out of necessity, although neither of them are quite worthy, in the eyes of the ladies, of the appellation of man. Captain Brown, however, who comes to settle in Cranford, bringing with him “manly frankness” and “excellent masculine common sense” which gives him “an extraordinary place as authority among the Cranford ladies” (9) is quite clearly a man and seemingly a threat. His interloping presence, his “invasion of their territories” (8) seems to threaten to change Cranford’s way of being precisely because male authority is traditionally seen to overpower female ways. And the ladies¹²² do appear to be reconciled to Captain Brown’s masculine, commonsensical way of viewing the world, but the reader can see that it is not entirely the case. His interference in the matter of Miss Barker’s cow, who has lost her fur in an accidental fall into a lime pit, makes his new role in Cranford clear. He suggests that Miss Barker should clothe her cow in “a flannel waistcoat and flannel drawers... if you wish to keep her alive. But my advice is, kill the poor creature at once” (10). Miss Barker “looked upon [the cow] as a daughter” and thus the “whole town knew and kindly regarded Miss Betty Barker’s Alderney”¹²³ (9), so it is not unexpected that Miss Barker chooses to follow the first part of the Captain’s suggestion, ignoring his ironical tone, and sends the cow back out to pasture happily “clad in dark grey flannel” (10). The Captain’s real advice, his common sense, is to kill the precious cow. It is the nature of Cranford instead to take his sarcastic suggestion seriously. What Captain Brown contributes to Cranford he does by mistake, through the misinterpretation of his masculine wisdom, and this is the way that it has to be because Miss Barker and the Captain have very different ideas about what is the reasonable reaction in the case of the cow. As his time in Cranford progresses, in fact, Captain Brown is the one who begins to adapt. Initially he shocks the sensitivities of Cranford society by being “so brazen as to talk of being poor” (8) in a town that has “tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated...

¹²¹ Cranford does cross professional gender lines in that it has a postwoman, though Mary clarifies “I say the postwoman, but I should say the postman’s wife” (140). The postman is too lame to complete his route except on special occasions, so his wife, who regularly delivers the mail, is essentially the postwoman. Mary’s confusion reveals the gap between names and actions as she assigns the title to the person who does the job, but then recalls herself. The episode enhances the idea that gender, like the title, is just a nominal idea, and that practically actions can transgress those limits.

¹²² With the absolute exception of Deborah Jenkyns, whose own masculine authority is threatened by his presence.

¹²³ Ingham notes that Gaskell herself kept at least one Alderney cow (note 10, 234) which she described to her daughter as “a very pretty young creature” (*Letters* 199).

could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished” (8). In Cranford ladies walk for refreshment, not to avoid the expense of transport, wear cheaper clothes out of a preference for the fabric, and barely serve any food at parties out of a sense of gentility, not frugality. When the Captain confesses that “no one could black his boots to please him, except himself” (17), he sounds downright Cranfordian. Mary notes that “indeed, he was not above saving the little maid-servant’s labours in every way – knowing... that his daughter’s illness made the place a hard one” (17) but he has distinctly caught the trick of making his own sacrifice seem like a positive thing. Cranford converts the Captain, not the other way around.

The real masculine threat to the feminine community at Cranford comes, with clearly developed irony, from Deborah Jenkyns, as Gaskell’s juxtaposes her pretensions toward masculine authority with her sister Matty’s feminine timidity and passivity, which ultimately proves effective in a different kind of way. Dodsworth sees Deborah as a militant feminist with a “hidden desire to equal the male” (135) but her wish to be taken seriously outside of the domestic realm is one of the few things that is not a secret in Cranford. Auerbach reads Deborah’s death as “the end of the severe patriarchal code which Deborah inherits from her remote, adored father and enshrines throughout her life” (82) and Huber makes the similar point that Deborah, “the consummate authority figure... becomes a brilliant parody of male tyranny in the Victorian family and community” (40). The authority that Deborah possesses is masculine, invested in masculine realms of classical learning, and self-vaunting. Deborah and Matty and everyone else have no doubt that Deborah is in the one in charge. Matty’s recollections of their childhood establish Deborah’s place as the surrogate son¹²⁴ to their father: “Deborah was the favourite... and when Peter disappointed him, she became his pride” (62). The relative positions of the two girls are established when Peter leaves for good, for, though Matty declares Deborah “was such a daughter to my father, as I think there never was before, or since,” the things that she does, “she read book after book, and wrote, and copied, and was always at his service in any parish business... she even once wrote a letter to the bishop for my father” (72), are the duties if

¹²⁴ A relationship that is clearly shown to come about because Peter, the actual son, resigns his place. Stoneman argues that in spite of his sex, Peter takes the feminine side of conventional authority. He “serves to undermine [his father’s] values, mocking... Deborah” and he “stands with Matty and their mother in opposition to paternal law” (62). Alyson Kiesel argues that Peter’s defection leaves his parents “fallen” (1002). His abandonment of the family provides the role for Deborah to step into, but also forces her to step into it. Matty comments that “Deborah said to me, the day of my mother’s funeral, that if she had a hundred offers, she never would marry and leave my father.... I don’t know that she had one; but it was not less to her credit to say so” (72). While the reader might laugh at Deborah’s sacrifice, it is nonetheless a sacrifice as she gives up her femininity to take up a masculine mantle.

not of a son, of a clerk. For Matty's own part, she recalls, "I did all I could to set Deborah at liberty to be with him; for I knew I was good for little, and that my best work in the world was to do odd jobs quietly, and set others at liberty" (72). Matty, by being quiet and unassuming and uncommended, is being the ultimate daughter to her father that she imagines Deborah is.

The differences between the two women are reinforced throughout the book, one particularly relevant example evident in their alternate ways of giving charitably. Each year Deborah, like the rest of Cranford, gives the Thomas the postman dinner and doles out money for his children. In past times, Thomas has had to eat with "Miss Jenkyns standing over him like a bold dragoon, questioning him as to his children... upbraiding him if another was likely to make its appearance," taking the "glorious opportunity for giving advice and benefitting her fellow-creatures" (141). When Deborah is gone and the event falls into Matty's charge, Mary sees "that she felt rather shy over the ceremony" though "not for the world would she have diminished Thomas's welcome, or his dole" (141). Instead she increases his comfort by leaving the kitchen while he eats so that he can pocket most of the food for another time, and "would steal the money all in a lump into his hand, as if she were ashamed of herself" (141). Deborah assumes that giving money also gives her the right to judge and advise and exercise authority, but Matty feels that her silence is just as helpful and more congenial. Stoneman suggests that Deborah's existence is a "sad paradox" for she has "assimilated the conditions of her own subordination" (58), but since she assimilates effectively, these are also the conditions of her own authority. Furthermore, Deborah's life as well as her death allow for the ascension of Matty, whose gestures towards liberalism and egalitarianism are always made in apologetic subversion of her sister's ideals. Matty can be freer because Deborah is so very rigid. Huber comments that in Cranford "those who are not necessarily the fittest can survive" (42) but the fact that the timorous Matty outlives her dragoon of a sister indicates that in she has a fitness for her environment that is not overtly recognizable. Deborah's authority and responsibility foster Matty's subtle, quiet, and effective, backlashes.

Not all readers of *Cranford* see Matty as triumphant or believe that Gaskell meant for her to be read as such. Pollard declares her "lovable but ineffectual," suggesting that her sister's death "represents an emancipation for Miss Matty, but it is also a setting adrift" (76). Stoneman sees her as "a victim of the nineteenth-century's systematic infantilization of women" and "not a heroine in the sense of being a model for admiration" (61). Ingham agrees that Matty's

“defective education proves disastrous when the outside economy impinges on her life” (xxiii). While she does not pontificate as grandly or even spell as correctly as does Deborah, however, Matty’s education does not leave her an entirely deficient infant. In fact, in spite of her own and her sister’s opinions, she is quite capable. The idea that she is not so arises from her bankruptcy,¹²⁵ but Mary has already informed us of Matty’s careful personal bookkeeping, and that “her accounts were always made straight – not a penny owing from the week before” (87). It is not through her own neglect or ignorance that Matty is ruined, but rather through the bad luck of the broken bank.¹²⁶ Matty believes that Deborah would have been more effective in the matter of the bank, telling Mary, “I’ve no doubt she would have seen after them, before they had got themselves into this state” (148) but the reader also knows that it was Deborah’s decision to invest in the bank in the first place, a choice that Mary’s father declares “the only unwise step that clever woman had ever taken” (141). It is Deborah, educated in the ways of the masculine world, who makes the mistake. That she, and Mary, have trouble understanding Mr. Smith’s explanation of the finances does make Matty look ignorant, but since his own “affairs were in a very anxious state” (165), one cannot put too much faith in Mr. Smith’s assessment. How much his education and knowledge will help him, in spite of his being “a capital man of business” (165), is dubious, and Matty instead depends on the very immediate and practical – and secret – help of her female friends in Cranford, and on Mary’s plan that she sell tea. Matty’s devotion to the feminine brings her the support and love and assistance of whoever can help her so that when she does go bankrupt she is saved in a way that Mr. Smith would never expect to be. He recognises this when he learns that the Cranford ladies have banded together to contribute secretly to Matty’s finances, saying “See, Mary, how a good innocent life makes friends all around. Confound it! I could make a good lesson out of it if I were a parson” (165). Mr. Smith’s business sensibilities do not allow him to fully comprehend the ideals of friendship and charity

¹²⁵ As Langland argues, Miss Matty challenges the traditionally severe world of economics: “Gaskell’s great challenge... lies in her ability to take the apparently trivial and make it productive, while reevaluating the ... world of commerce and suggesting its emptiness” (119). Jill Rappaport makes the argument more specific as she examines *Cranford* in terms of gift-giving practices. She suggests that through “principles of sympathetic and economic conservation, *Cranford*’s system of exchange reworks material limitations, turning these women’s lack of private property to their advantage” (95). The bankruptcy episode brings the issue of alternate economic strategies to the fore.

¹²⁶ Eric Hobsbawn notes that bankruptcy “was, according to economic theory, the penalty of the inefficient businessman and its spectre haunts the novels of Victorian England” (162). Its prevalence in fiction suggests that Victorians worried about it, but Hobsbawn goes on to suggest that in reality it was not a very common occurrence (162).

that Matty inspires. Perhaps Mr. Smith could also understand that lesson if he were a woman, as his business-minded, masculine ideals of competition prevent him from quite comprehending.¹²⁷ He can see that Matty possesses something that he does not, but he does not articulate it as power. The contrast between the two sisters is a microcosmic example of the contrast in power between the two sexes. Deborah is the tyrannical patriarch who is officially assigned the power, and Matty, officially powerless, is through other means significantly more effective. It suggests the arbitrary but effective division of authority based on gendered traits within a family. The Panic episode in *Cranford* then further interrogates the construction of masculine and feminine power within the community.

The Panic highlights the complexity of Gaskell's thinking on gender and agency, ultimately suggesting the self-serving nature of the construction of an "other" gender, but also the value of power gained through such construction. It deals with the construction of masculinity as power, but as power that can be easily neutralised or subverted. The negotiation of agency on the level of construction or imagination then leads to the confidence and ability to act effectively when an actual crisis comes to Cranford. The Panic takes place after a travelling conjuror, Signor Brunoni, comes to town and the Cranford ladies attend his magic show. Dodsworth describes the ensuing anxiety as "hysteria" and "wild stories," and insists that there "is no truth in them; they are merely a reflection of the unconscious fear aroused by Brunoni's demonstration of masculine power" (141). However, Auerbach notes that "Brunoni's power is more theatrical than real" (84) and it is perhaps more helpful to look at the town's reaction to it as dramatic as well, more concerned with conscious imaginings than unconscious reactions. Shortly after Brunoni leaves "all sorts of uncomfortable rumours got afloat in the town" (107) about various robberies that have taken place, and various means by which to foil any further such crime are put into action. At Matty's domicile, for example, by the door, the fire-irons are "skilfully piled up like spillikins, ready to fall with an awful clatter, if only a cat had touched the outside panels" (111). The ladies base their anxiety on three events, each of which is associated with the male. First, a man's footprints are discovered in the flowerbed of the widow Mrs.

¹²⁷ Shortly after this comment, Mr. Smith proves that he has not heeded that lesson, as he sputters about Matty making sure her plan to sell tea will not hurt the owner of the general store. He wonders "how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each others' interests, which would put a stop to all competition directly" (169-70). Mary is quick to subvert his authority (in the reader's eyes, not his own) by pointing out that "with all my father's suspicion of everyone with whom he has dealings, and in spite of all of his many precautions, he lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year" (170).

Jamieson, and two days later her dog is dead.¹²⁸ Second, Miss Pole, Cranford's most knowledgeable spinster, both in the ways of the world in general and especially about the intimate details of her neighbours' lives, spies "two very bad-looking men [go] three times past the house, very slowly" (110) and encounters an Irish beggar woman. These three grow in Miss Pole's report to become "that murderous gang," metamorphosing in looks as well. The woman in particular, Miss Pole recalls, is "masculine looking – a perfect virago; most probably a man dressed in woman's clothes: afterwards, we heard of a beard on her chin, and a manly voice and a stride" (114).¹²⁹ These two threats seem dangerously masculine, or rather, because they seem threatening, they take on masculine characteristics.

The third alarming event, on the other hand, takes Mr. Hoggins as its victim and reveals that not only is masculinity associated with dangerous criminality, but also with a desire to consolidate its power by denying that it is threatened. The story, as we first hear it from Miss Pole, is this: "Mr. Hoggins... had been attacked at his own door by two ruffians who were concealed in the shadow of the porch, and so effectually silenced him, that he was robbed in the interval between ringing his bell and the servant's answering it" (114). Anxious to get the details, Miss Pole goes to the extreme length of having her teeth examined and comes back exasperated that "after all, Mr. Hoggins is too much of a man to own that he was robbed" (115). Resigned that "men will be men" (114), Miss Pole chooses not to believe Hoggins's story, which is that she "must have heard an exaggerated account of some petty theft of a neck of mutton" which "he had the impertinence to add, he believed... was taken by the cat" (115). By downplaying (or, perhaps, telling the truth about) the robbery that he suffers, Mr. Hoggins believes he is allaying the panic, suggesting that it is just a cat and nothing to worry about. The line between kindness and condescension, as Miss Pole recognises, is negligible here. However, she is condescending right back, as she and the other ladies decide that because Mr. Hoggins's version challenges their own, it is an "imposition" which causes them to "duly condemn ... the want of candour which Mr. Hoggins had evinced, and abuse... men in general, taking him for the representative and

¹²⁸ As Mary notes, however, whether his unfortunate demise is the result of his poor diet and lack of exercise or something more sinister, is impossible to say.

¹²⁹ Huber discusses the various instances of transvestism or cross-dressing that occur in *Cranford*, concluding that "because there is an aura of the absurd and / or the threatening about each of them, they suggest Gaskell's sense of the anomaly of ill-defined gender roles" (44). I contend that in this instance Miss Pole bestows masculine characteristics on the Irish woman in order to uphold the established gender stereotype that men are more dangerous than women.

type” (115). In this instance, Hoggins’s insistence on the everyday, relatively non-threatening cat-thief, in opposition to Miss Pole’s murderous gang, suggests to the reader that men – in general, because we are instructed to take him as the representative – are less eagerly credulous than women. What it suggests to Miss Pole, however, is that men are too careful of their reputation as powerful, wanting “to be considered Samson and Solomon rolled into one – too strong ever to be beaten or discomfited – too wise ever to be outwitted” (114). In Miss Pole’s mind, Mr. Hoggins is presenting an image of himself, in defiance of the real facts, in order to preserve a masculine show of power. Thus, men in general are falsely distinguished from the ladies because they do not admit their weaknesses. Here we have a double construction of masculinity, as Miss Pole envisions it as falsely imagining and perpetuating itself as all-wise and all-powerful, but this in itself is her perception, which she and the other ladies can, in their admission of weakness, feel superior to. The ladies come to a distinct awareness of the constructed nature of masculinity, and they profit from it.

Gaskell complicates the utility of gender roles even further as the ladies also use masculinity, or the idea of masculinity, as a show of power to defend themselves from the dangers that seem to surround them, but again the transparency of their tactics serves to enhance the impression that it is not men that are necessary, but rather the idea of something more powerful than themselves. Before she is insulted by his not being robbed, Miss Pole is discovered to have “begged one of Mr. Hoggins’s worn-out hats to hang up in her lobby” (107) to make it seem as though there is a man in the house. Matty, who is terrified by the possibility that somehow a man might be hiding under her bed, possesses herself of a ball which she rolls under it every night, and “if it came out on the other side, well and good; if not, she always took care to have her hand on the bell-rope, and meant to call out John and Harry, just as if she expected men-servants to answer her ring. We all applauded this ingenious contrivance” (117). Matty and Miss Pole make themselves comfortable by creating the appearance of masculine assistance ready to come to their rescue should the worst occur. Mrs. Forrester, whose late father and husband were both officers in the English military, is convinced that the threat must somehow be connected to the French and so takes the even more drastic step of having “borrowed a boy from one of the neighbouring cottages” (117), giving him his supper in exchange for his sleeping there: “She had instructed him in his possible duties when he first came; and finding him sensible, she had given him the Major’s sword... and desired him to put it

very carefully behind his pillow at night... if he heard any noise, he was to run at it with his sword drawn" (118). Here is the real masculine power of sword-wielding being put to use by a real male to the actual potential danger and destruction of any thief, murderous gang, or Frenchman. Mary, who is always mindful of practicalities, suggests the very real danger of Mrs. Forrester's armed boy, worrying that "some accident might occur from such slaughterous and indiscriminate directions, and that he might rush on Jenny getting up to wash, and have spitted her before he discovered that she was not a Frenchman" (118). However, to Mary's relief, even this protector dissolves into an imaginary threat as Mrs. Forrester admits he is "a very sound sleeper, and generally had to be well shaken, or cold-pigged in a morning before they could rouse him" (118) and it turns out that her deeper motivation for borrowing the boy is so that she can feed him properly every night, "for he was half-starved at home" (118). It may appear to be more dangerous to borrow the kind of masculine presence that stabs people with swords than to simply borrow a hat, but Gaskell undercuts this potential by showing that this particular boy will be stabbing no one. In actuality, the protection here is performed by Mrs. Forrester herself, who defends the boy against attacks of hunger, the most immediate threat he faces. For the ladies, then, during the Panic, imaginary masculine protection serves against imaginary masculine threat, and allows the ladies to feel sufficient in their abilities to counter such threat through clever devices and deception – their ingenious contrivances. In *Cranford*, because the violence and aggression associated with masculinity only exist as a construction, protection need only be a construction as well. The challenge is not only to what the ladies see as Mr. Hoggins's ideal of masculinity, but to the concept of authority as aggression on larger terms, as only perpetuated by people's belief in it. The ladies of *Cranford* argue that weak women can create masculine strength simply by creating imaginary men. In this way they both maintain and overcome the division of power accorded by gender, and they can celebrate their ingeniousness in doing so.

Having established an awareness of the artificial natures of both genders, Gaskell also presents the realities faced by women and men as a way to reveal the utility of those artificial codes. She resolves the mystery of Signor Brunoni and the ensuing panic with the story of Mrs. Brown, who acts, out of necessity, with overtly unfeminine determination. Signor Brunoni is discovered to be Samuel Brown, a former soldier in the Indian wars, now recovering from an injury sustained in a driving accident that took place as he made his way out of Cranford. Mary attributes the end of the ladies' fear to "finding out that he, who had first excited our love of the

marvellous by his unprecedented arts, had not sufficient everyday gifts to manage a shying horse” (125). Jill Rappaport points out that “the feeble and feminised man... bears more resemblance to the women themselves and ... can therefore receive some of their sympathy” (97). Brown also proves the ladies’ suspicions that masculinity is indeed fallible. His wife, Mrs. Brown, though, proves that she has more than sufficient abilities in more than everyday situations, as she tells Mary about her own time in India, where she gave birth to and then buried six children, only saving the seventh by leaving her husband and walking through the jungle to Calcutta carrying the infant, and then making her way back to England by enlisting as a servant. She tells Mary what she told her husband: “Sam, when the child is born, and I am strong, I shall leave you; it will cut my heart cruel; but if this baby dies too, I shall go mad; the madness is in me now; but if you let me go down to Calcutta, carrying my baby step by step, it will maybe work itself off” (129). “It” here is the madness, worked off and defeated by Mrs. Brown’s taking action and making the trek as much as by the survival of the child. Mrs. Brown chooses against the passive role of the wife in order to take action to save her child and herself. Her husband is bound by his job – he cannot desert his military position and so must remain in India and fulfill his responsibilities. It is because Mrs. Brown officially has less power and strength than him that she has the ability to leave and to save the child – heroic actions that prove to be effectively accomplished by a woman. Both the material world that Mrs. Brown has to cope with and the imaginary dangers and solutions the Cranford ladies contend with prove fertile ground for female agency as reactionary to assumptions about gender, but also as evidence for the utility of those assumptions.

Mrs. Brown’s effort and accomplishment, as well as her motivation, contrast sharply with the agency of the ladies of Cranford, which up until this point has been mainly engaged in the imaginative and semantic construction of their world. After this episode the scope of their agency expands when Matty faces a crisis of her own and the ladies step in to help her out. Mrs. Brown’s story is also the impetus for Mary to take action and send a letter to the mysterious Aga Jenkyns, who she guesses may be connected to Peter who disappeared in India long ago. These actions eventually prove to resolve Matty’s trouble and end the book happily. Significantly, though, they are actions undertaken in secret. The effects of both are more immediately recognisable than the imagined solutions to the threats of the panic, but the acts are still subversive, as the ladies want Matty to believe that she is beholden to no one. Through these

characters who are intimately invested in the categories of masculinity and femininity, Gaskell manages to present gender as both ridiculous and essential. Just as Mary and Matty build up their precarious pile of fire-iron spillikins to warn them of danger, the ladies build up their idea of masculinity to create a sense of pride in their own difference and ability to foil that power. The comment on the constructed nature of gender suggests that it is a convenience by which the ladies can feel themselves superior in their subversive power and their ability to see through, deconstruct and reconstruct constructions and thus beat the system. The ladies of Cranford gain agency during the Panic by buying into the idea of masculinity as more physically powerful than femininity, and then by countering with constructed men. Masculinity only exists in Cranford as something the ladies identify themselves against. If any lesson is taken from the Panic it is not Mr. Hoggins's, that there is no reason to panic, but that the ladies determine on their own ability, which stands them in good stead to cope with Matty's coming financial collapse.

Gaskell's short story "A Fear for the Future," published five years after *Cranford*, presents the masculine view on the power of powerlessness, as Gaskell creates a male narrative persona who is concerned with and threatened by changing ideals of femininity. This perspective allows her to examine the utility of gender roles from the position of the supposedly powerful, and to show how they work from that point of view. Like most of Gaskell's short fiction, "A Fear" has garnered very little critical attention,¹³⁰ but it provides important access to Gaskell's awareness of gender as a construct, suggesting the attraction and the utility of idealized femininity from a male perspective. When he moves to London after many years of retirement in the country and is confronted with young women who are interested in professions and politics and who wear thick and ugly boots besides, this unnamed narrator reveals a belief in constructs of femininity in many ways parallel to the Cranfordian beliefs about masculinity. His argument

¹³⁰ The neglect of this particular piece can be partially explained by the fact that it was not identified as Gaskell's until Anna Unsworth and A.Q. Morton's 1981 article "Mrs. Gaskell Anonymous: Some Unidentified Items in *Fraser's Magazine*." Unsworth discusses Gaskell's familiarity with *Fraser's* and its editor, J.A. Froude, and her history of anonymous contribution to it as well as other periodicals (25). Unsworth relies on her own familiarity with Gaskell's writing to make a confident "educated guess" (26) at the works that might be hers. Morton then examines six works, including "A Fear," identified by Unsworth, comparing them to two works accepted as Gaskell's, also published in *Fraser's*. He uses a stylometric method of comparison of the frequency of words and the positioning of words in sentences (28), concluding that "the habits are consistent within the different essays and none differs from Mrs. Gaskell" (29). While there is as yet no corroboration historical evidence, the combined approach of Unsworth's specific expertise on Gaskell and Morton's statistical analysis make their results convincing, and the works concerned are now accepted as Gaskell's writing by the Encyclopedia Britannica / Project Gutenberg and the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, among others.

is that if women insist on abandoning traditional modes of femininity, there will be no reason for men to be attracted to them, and thus the whole future of humanity is at stake. The narrator insists that these “changes are not of that class which simply affect dress, manners, and customs” (244) and then proceeds to examine the dress, manners, and customs of women to prove his argument, at the same time suggesting that the problem is as small, or as big, as these outward manifestations of gender expectations. His discussion of the difference between the ideal women of his past and the modern women he meets reveal both a self-interested motivation for the preservation of feminine gender codes, as well as the constructed nature of those codes in the first place. What the narrator finds attractive about the women of his young days boils down to two things which for him define femininity: passive helplessness and dependence upon men, and absolute admiration for and devotion to the men they love. A corollary of these is the impracticality or uselessness that hinges on these aspects of the feminine. The narrator fondly remembers when he courted his wife, “what colds she used to catch, walking with me along the banks of the river after sunset, clad in a muslin dress and lace pelerine!” (245). The outfit is worn for its attractive qualities, but it is clearly not practical for the situation. The incapacitating inappropriateness of the clothes, however, makes their wearer even more attractive because of her willingness to sacrifice comfort to spend time with her lover. The narrator specifically identifies masculine strength as created in response to feminine weakness, applauding the “chivalric deference that conscious strength always feels to conscious helplessness” and the “proper manly feelings of protecting tenderness to... physical weakness” (248). He insists that “of these peculiar feelings love is born” (248). In short, the old-fashioned “soul of womanhood” that the narrator fears losing is one that compliments him and men like him by making him feel needed and adored. He embodies the kind of masculinity the Cranford ladies imagine Hoggins to, and understands that it requires a weaker gender to make it essential or important.

In the narrator’s nostalgic description of his courtship, however, though he is blissfully, ignorantly sincere in his praises, an awareness of the deceptive nature of this femininity is present. The narrator reminisces that when he “quoted poetry (sometime’s Byron’s but more frequently my own, which she preferred), how she listened ... in breathless admiration and delight!” (245) and he fondly recalls her requests to hear him play the flute “six or seven times over,” though he is well aware that he was “dreadfully out of tune... and look[ed] anything but sublime in the act” (245). Still, he cannot imagine that she recognised these defects and

interprets her reaction as sincere, concluding “There’s enthusiasm and sentiment for you!” (245). The reader cannot help but see the blindness on his part and that his beloved’s appreciation of his talents is expressly meant to flatter and woo him. Her helplessness, which is the final attraction, is couched in interestingly threatening terms. He claims “the bewildering helplessness with which she looked at me with those dove-like eyes - - ah, it was irresistible. No man could be expected to stand it” (245). What is “bewildering” here is also called “bewitching,” a “peril” that “menaces masculine bosoms,” and “that enslaved us bachelors of long ago” (245), suggesting not innocence or ignorance, so much as entrapment. The naivety of the male narrator allows Gaskell to suggest just how constructed these feminine graces could be, and to what end – securing a husband – they were practiced. He is aware only that this kind of femininity is attractive, but not of the role of the dupe that he plays in falling for the flattery that enslaves him, nor would he not want to be enslaved. Because of the limited perspective of the narrator, the sincerity of this aspect of femininity is questionable, but to him all that matters is that it *appears* genuine. The rest of the piece reveals how much more attractive, and in fact healthy, modern womanhood could be to women;¹³¹ however, even as she satirizes the narrator and points out his blindness and selfishness, Gaskell celebrates his ideal of femininity that is in fact the selfless opposite of the narrator. As is the case in *Cranford*, the mythical ideal of another gender, one devoted to him, makes the narrator feel good about himself and serves to make him more powerful.

In both of these works, Gaskell shows how (mis)constructing the other gender allows the constructor to feel powerful, and in *Cranford* to translate the agency practiced on an imaginative basis into practical ways of doing good. The myth of masculine power and feminine helplessness allows men to feel that they are powerful and useful, and women, by recognizing that it is a myth and there are ways both to subvert it and support it, to feel powerful too. While she takes a certain amount of delight in satirizing the silliness of the construction of gender – neither the ladies of *Cranford* or the narrator of “A Fear for the Future” are allowed to escape ridicule for their presumed perception of the motivations of the opposite sex – yet Gaskell seriously considers the necessity of a hierarchy of power when it comes to gender, because it creates conditions in which real good can be done, either to enhance the psychological wellbeing of an

¹³¹ Speaking of the practical dress of modern women, the narrator admits, “I suppose the influence of the statistics of female health under this new regime must be considerable. All very well; but when I was a young man the notion of statistics in connection with a woman would have appeared to me almost profanely impertinent” (246).

individual or a group of people, or the material wellbeing. The responsibilities and ways of thinking that are attached to official power need to be countered by the alternate ways of thinking and doing that are the domain of the officially powerless. In *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell takes more seriously the problem that she mocks in “A Fear for the Future” and *Cranford*, as she questions what happens when men fall for false representations of femininity and ignore the genuine.

Gaskell’s final and unfinished¹³² novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1864) is her most sustained domestic love story and the work that raises the most questions about how gender expectations work in terms of power in the traditionally feminine situations of home and local society. Like *Cranford* and “A Fear,” *Wives and Daughters* deals with issues of love and marriage, but it also includes aspects of literary romance, as it follows the trails of Molly Gibson in her quest for identity and fulfillment, trials that include facing down expectations of how a young woman should behave. Praised as the masterpiece of the mature Gaskell in its attention to detail and the psychologically convincing portraits of the characters, as a self-proclaimed “every-day story” it has also been dismissed as disengaged from political commentary or critique. The setting of the novel, in the early part of the century in the rural idyll of Hollingford cements the connection with *Cranford* and the appearance of innocence from political ramifications. So too does its concern with the lives of women. Lansbury’s 1984 analysis makes the important point that the “title of the novel expresses the limitations of this society for women: there are only two recognized roles” (109) and suggests that it is Gaskell’s subtle critique of this reality. Stoneman reads in a similar vein, finding that *Wives and Daughters* “for the first time makes central what had earlier been an unacknowledged problem; the education of daughters to be wives” (113). These discoveries of challenges to patriarchal authority within the conventional domestic romance that makes up the novel opened the way for more specific feminist readings such as Laurie Buchanan’s contention in 1990 that *Wives and Daughters* “challenges patriarchal notions about women’s “natural” capacity for mothering” (501), and Mary Waters’s suggestion that Gaskell follows in Mary Wollstonecraft’s footsteps in critiquing traditional education for girls and specifically the role played by conduct books (13). *Wives and Daughters* has become a rich

¹³² Critical practice has been to take the assurance of Frederick Greenwood, editor of *Cornhill* in which *Wives and Daughters* was being serialized, to heart when he claims that “if the work is not complete, little remains to be added to it.... We know that Roger Hamley will marry Molly, and that is what we are most concerned about” (*Wives and Daughters* 683). One does wonder, though, as Roger himself does, how easy Gaskell would have made it for him to convince Molly that his love for Cynthia was in error, and his love for her is true.

source for feminist readings of her ideology, in a large part because it is so focused on the domestic and on the conventional romance plot.¹³³ Linda K. Hughes describes the “new intellectual structures effected by science and technology, and resulting changes in social and gender relations” (91) as a prologue to the rise of modernity. My reading focuses on gendered struggles for identity and power and the two different models of femininity that Gaskell depicts in her heroines. I examine the ways in which the agency of feminine passivity and influence is negotiated in the realms it is expected to occupy: the home and the marriage market, and how Gaskell tries to create a balance between such agency and individual independence.

The most striking example of feminine power in these realms is Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick, later Mrs. Gibson, one of the “wives” of the title, and the mother of the “daughters.” Mrs. Gibson is a character who has excited the contempt of critics, perhaps more so than any other Gaskell creation, though she is not an out and out villain. Pollard calls her “vulgar, calculating, materialistic, sentimental, petulant, hypocritical and egoistic” (238) and Wright concludes that “we may take the creation of Mrs. Gibson as Mrs. Gaskell’s ironic salutation to the imperfect world that, in spite of the suffering it caused, gave her so much amusement to observe” (228). Her insensitive and sometimes underhanded dealings with the affairs of her family, along with her positive refusals to see these machinations as misguided, do make Mrs. Gibson a difficult character to like. The reader first sees her through the eyes of the child Molly, who identifies her as “the most beautiful person she had ever seen” (13) but both Molly and the reader quickly learn this beauty is only skin deep, as Mrs. Gibson proves insensitive, greedy, hypocritical, and primarily concerned with her own needs. Mrs. Gibson is clearly not meant to be a paragon of virtue, but she is a prime example of a certain ideal of femininity, as she uses her person, manners, and charms to negotiate her way with the economy of society, and especially marriage. She has learned from her own experience that marriage is essential to female happiness. Thinking back over the years she has spent “toiling and moiling for money” (100) as a governess and schoolteacher, Mrs. Gibson decides “It is not natural. Marriage is the natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do, and his wife sits in the drawing-

¹³³ Most recently, criticism has taken the tack of following the scientific and evolutionary themes that run through *Wives and Daughters*. Mary Debrabant (2002) and Leon Litvack (2004) have established the relationships between Darwinian interests and gendered and colonial survival strategies, suggesting how the novel comments on its own time rather than being stuck in a nostalgic past. Karen Boiko importantly links the evolutionary theme with changes in class relations, arguing that in *Wives and Daughters* class “finds distinction in character rather than inheritance or money” (88).

room like a lady” (100). The apparent laziness, selfishness, and mercenary views which Mrs. Gibson has of marriage are essentially the ones she is expected, as a woman, to have, especially since governessing, the only remunerative work her situation allows her to do, is so distasteful to her. Mrs. Gibson’s agency is that of passive influence and underhanded arrangement, and it finds its focus in the task of matchmaking. She is, as Waters convincingly shows, the product of “a conventional education of exactly the kind criticized by Wollstonecraft, the kind based on the precepts of the conduct books” (15). She is what conduct book writers would have woman be, focused entirely on finding a husband and security through marriage for herself and for her daughters. Waters suggests that in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell presents Mrs. Gibson as evidence for Wollstonecraft’s claim that the advice of authorities such as Dr. Gregory, that a woman’s role is to beguile a man into marriage by her physical charms and complacent agreement, is “a recipe for marital disaster” (Waters 16). The unhappy way in which the Gibsons’ marriage plays out, from his point of view at any rate, supports this. For Mrs. Gibson, though, the ending is happy, for though her dreams of a high-society London lifestyle go unfulfilled, yet, as Langland notes, she raises her husband’s as well as her own social status in Hollingford, and Cynthia’s marriage will allow her to visit London in style as well. While Mrs. Gibson’s matchmaking schemes are deplored by Molly and Mr. Gibson, and mocked by Cynthia, both girls eventually benefit from them. She saves them “from the ambiguous status of doctor’s daughters and potential governesses” (Langland 134). Her insistent schemes to encourage the right kind of eligible young men to visit create the opportunities that she hopes they will. As she faces her husband’s wrath for interfering with his professional code as a doctor,¹³⁴ Mrs. Gibson declares her innocence of wrongdoing, “sulkily” rebutting “He was in love with Cynthia long before that conversation, and she liked him so much... I don’t see how you would have a mother love her child if she may not turn the accidental to her advantage” (402). Mrs. Gibson’s defense puts her in the position of passive advocate; she is simply allowing true love to run its course once she sees that it will be a financially and socially positive step. Her further appeal to her husband, “I should have thought you would be rather glad than otherwise to get Cynthia well married, and off your hands” (403), reinforces the truth that Cynthia depends financially on her stepfather until such time as she marries or becomes a governess. Mrs. Gibson dissembles, but

¹³⁴ Mrs. Gibson has discovered, through eavesdropping and a little research in her husband’s medical encyclopedia, that Osborne Hamley, elder son and inheritor of his father’s estate, is terminally ill, and so has begun to encourage his younger brother Roger’s suit of Cynthia.

she is proud of her accomplishments, and in a novel that locates its happy resolution in marriage, she should be.

In the case of Molly's marriage, Mrs. Gibson's influence is especially subtle and almost negative, but still effective. After Mr. Gibson has provided Cynthia with money for her trip to London, his grateful wife thinks to repay him: "she too would be kind to Molly, and dress her becomingly, and invite young men to the house; do all the things, in fact, which Molly and her father did not want to have done" (445). Mrs. Gibson is not the only person who understands matchmaking as the necessary duty of a mother. After Cynthia's marriage to Mr. Henderson and his "handsome private fortune" (658), Mrs. Goodenough, representative of Hollingford society in general, teases Mrs. Gibson about her part in pulling it off, ending, "I'm not saying but what it is right in a mother" (658) and hoping that Mrs. Gibson will "be turning your mind to doing something for Miss Molly there?" (658). Molly herself responds, "half-angry, half-laughing. 'When I want to be married, I'll not trouble Mamma. I'll look out for myself'" (658), but while Mrs. Gibson also declines involvement, in the next breath she mentions that Molly has just come from a visit to the Cumnors, and that "It has been a great advantage to her being at the Towers while so many clever and distinguished people were there.... and now she is going to Hamley Hall" (659), Mrs. Goodenough understands this as Mrs. Gibson means her to, and is "thankful somewhat is being done for Miss Molly's chances" (659). It is her further comment, not meant to be overheard, that "Mrs. Gibson is a deep un. There's Mr. Roger Hamley as like as not to have the Hall estate, and she sends Molly a-visiting" (660), that discomposes Molly to the point that at the Hall she is "so different from her usual self" that "her perfect freedom was gone; and with it half her chance, that is to say, half her chance would have be lost over any strangers who had not known her before" (661). Sense and syntax become awkward here, as the narrator begins to sound like Mrs. Gibson herself, for what might this chance be, if not the chance that Mrs. Goodenough and Mrs. Gibson hope for? Though Molly does not realize it or mean it to, her standoffish behavior pushes Roger to commit to his love for her. Mrs. Gibson's tactics are both those of a self-interested, devious, socially aggressive manager of status and security, and of a caring, conscientious mother. Because she eventually manages to bring about the happiness of both daughters, the reader cannot simply condemn her for her interference. Rather, Mrs. Gibson must stand in some respect as a shining example of the effective role a woman can play in the essential matter of her daughters' marriages, and of how female agency can mean the

manipulation of people's thoughts and feelings. She may be difficult to like, but her motivations are understandable, and she is finally effective in her matchmaking as both daughters end up financially and emotionally happy.

Cynthia Kirkpatrick is in many ways her mother's daughter, using traditionally feminine wiles to charm the men in the book, but she is more genuinely passive in her role, depending on her physical charms and men's assumptions about her, as well as a natural need for affection to draw them in, rather than on machinations or plots.¹³⁵ Critics tend to view Cynthia in a more positive light than they do Mrs. Gibson, seeing her as a victim of her circumstances and her mother's neglect, and as a more complicated character psychologically than the straightforwardly good Molly.¹³⁶ Stoneman recognizes that without "both affection and practical security, yet constrained by feminine propriety, Cynthia has no alternative but to adopt the arts of the pleasing female" (119). In fact, part of what makes Cynthia so attractive to the men in the novel, and perhaps to readers too, is how beautifully and naturally Cynthia practices these arts.¹³⁷ Just as she once did with Mrs. Gibson, Molly notices first off how incredibly beautiful Cynthia is, and "fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant" (224). Cynthia's power is exercised similarly on the men she meets, through no apparent will or exertion of her own, although with a distinction in behavior depending on the sex of her companion: "she was always much quieter with men than with women; it was part of the charm of her soft allurements that she was so passive" (240). Just how entirely Cynthia's attractiveness is passive, though, is questionable. When Cynthia is introduced to Roger for the first time, the narrator, channeling Molly's hint of jealousy, notices a "sort of child-like innocence and wonder... which did not quite belong to Cynthia's character. She put on her armor of magic that evening – involuntarily as she always did; but on the other side, she could not help trying her power on strangers" (248). The immediate result of this magic is that Molly is deprived of Roger's conversation, and Cynthia is bored by it. The larger result is that Roger, reminiscent of the narrator of "A Fear for the Future," absolutely believes in

¹³⁵ While she develops few schemes of her own, Cynthia does depend very much on her mother's plotting to further her romantic prospects, and on Molly's straightforward action to save her from the trouble her own passivity leads her into.

¹³⁶ See Pollard (240), and Lynch and Colon's argument that suggests Cynthia is Gaskell's "enlightened" and "sympathetic portrait of a mind diseased" (62), for example.

¹³⁷ Part of what detracts from Mrs. Gibson's attraction is that she is too old to be entirely effective, so that her charm begins to look like affectation, especially juxtaposed with Cynthia's. Her reasoning for keeping Cynthia away from her wedding illustrates her own recognition of this fact: "She had felt how disagreeable it would be to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride" (125).

Cynthia's interest in what he has to say, and falls in love. Cynthia's responsibility or culpability for her charms is manifestly unclear. Her magic is armor she puts on, a seemingly defensive gesture, but the armor is also power which has an effect on people other than herself. While she arms herself involuntarily, Cynthia also enjoys testing her power on strangers, yet she cannot help doing so. What is passive, then, appears not to be the magic itself, although it involves acting in a passive manner, but Cynthia's will to prevent herself from using it. The power of her charm is intoxicating enough that she cannot help exercising it and seeing it at work. It is under her control, but she is also under the control of the way it makes her feel, and Roger, Molly, and even Mr. Gibson also fall under its control. Emily Blair points out that in using her charms, "Cynthia's desire is not sexual; her desire is for a specific definition of femininity and an affirmation of herself" (107). Blair points to the mutually narcissistic relationships Cynthia cultivates: "she wants to see herself reflected in the eyes of her numerous lovers even as she reflects back what they want to see about themselves" (107). There does not appear to be anything inherently wrong with the arrangement either, for after all Cynthia is simply acting out the role that she is meant to occupy as a properly feminine woman, but Gaskell complicates it by the fact that for Cynthia there are those numerous lovers, and that they mistake her charm for devotion to them. In "A Fear," it does not effectually matter if the narrator's wife does not prefer his poetry to Byron's, because even if she does not, she loves him enough to pretend for him. Cynthia's desire to use her power on many lovers prevents her from making such a commitment.

The pleasure that Cynthia takes in the effects of her beauty and charm on various men is shown to be potentially dangerous to herself and to others, but also ultimately advantageous to her in that she is able to test which kind of man will best suit as her husband. When it comes to courting Roger, Cynthia is, in Molly's eyes, "the conscious if passive bait" (363) in Mrs. Gibson's traps,¹³⁸ but once the half-engagement is in place, she is the force that insists on its secrecy while she tries to decide if she will actually marry Roger. She ponders the future in a manner unlike the dreams expected from a newly engaged young woman, telling the shocked Molly, "I think the chances are equal – the chances for and against our marriage, I mean. Two years! it's a long time; he may change his mind, or I may; or someone else may turn up, and say I'm engaged to him" (397). Everything that Cynthia suggests she sees as chance or fate, not as

¹³⁸ Molly considers that she herself would not submit, and would even go against her natural impulses and affection for Roger in order to "resist" Mrs. Gibson's arrangements (363).

something that comes as the result of choice. She also presents as hypothetical what she knows to be likely, that Mr. Preston will make her previous engagement to himself public. In doing so she takes no responsibility for it, which tack she continues on even as she reveals her predicament to Molly. She presents herself as victim of his schemes, carried along by her loneliness and sad want of money to accept his loan, but at the same time admits her own desire for power as a motivating factor. She says, "I began to think I did look pretty in my fine new clothes.... I was certainly the belle of the house, and it was very pleasant to feel my power" (494). Cynthia discovers that her power has, apparently against her will, captured Preston's heart and she ends up secretly engaged to him. Molly wonders how Cynthia's acquiescence turns to the hatred she has seen Cynthia evince toward him, noting that after all "you seem to have taken it very passively all this time" (496). Here the danger of Cynthia's passive charm is revealed, and her desire to shirk responsibility or even overt decision-making in favor of the easier route of simply leaving things to chance becomes questionable. As Molly points out, Cynthia's non-refusal simply adds to her trouble. Cynthia's reason for her growing dislike of her lover is also revealing, as she admits "He made me feel as if I was in his power" (496). By giving in and promising herself to him, Cynthia relinquishes her power over Preston. Cynthia's sentiments reflect Dr. Gregory here, who cautions his daughters that to reveal too much of their own feelings to a lover is to lose their power over him, as well as his love: "If you love him, let me advise you never to discover to him the full extent of your love, no not although you marry him" (88). The "certain consequence," Gregory observes, of a woman letting a man know he is beloved by her, "is satiety and disgust" (88). This is what Cynthia feels after making her promise to Preston. To reserve admission of love is to preserve the power of the passive love object.

Cynthia's dealings with her two other fiancées similarly show her as ultimately desiring the power of the passively adored, not responsible for loving but rather for being the object of unquestioning love. She apparently likes Roger quite a bit up until he proposes; then, his interests, like his letters, quickly begin to bore her. Her decision to positively end her engagement to Roger is the firmest one she makes, and her reasoning is not that her feelings for him have changed, but that she is anxious that he will love her less when he knows about the Preston affair. She says, "I cannot bear to exculpate myself to Roger Hamley. I will not submit to his thinking less well of me that he has done, – however foolish his judgment may have been" (576). In accepting Henderson's proposal, Cynthia tells Molly that she has revealed to him that

she is “not constant,” and that “he liked me just as I was; so you see he’s fairly warned” (634). It is not Henderson who is truly warned, but Cynthia who has secured herself the guarantee of a husband who cannot reproach her for the flaws that he will inevitably discover in her armor of magic. Cynthia is so adept at the art of passive attraction and the avoidance of active denial or repulsion that she causes trouble in that she has too many lovers, and persistent ones, at the same time, so convinced by her demeanor that she loves only them that they cannot believe her even when she does refuse them. As Hughes notices, however, “by choosing [her] mate herself, appropriating the agency of selection that Darwin would later reserve for males” (102), Cynthia’s wavering passivity in encouraging and even accepting more than one offer of marriage empowers her to be the one to make a decision that will greatly affect her life’s happiness. She does not have to marry Mr. Preston, or Roger, or even Mr. Coxe; Cynthia always has another option. By the end of the novel, Cynthia has proven the efficacy of the power of feminine charm. With Cynthia, Gaskell demonstrates the ultimate power of feminine passivity to attract, as well as the corresponding difficulty of repelling what it has attracted. Cynthia gains her power through the way men react to her, but it is a power that she then loses if they get to know her too well, or if she admits to a reciprocal love for them. However, Cynthia also recognizes and understands her power for what it is, choosing at last a husband whose perceptions match the depth of her attraction and who will continue to worship her and be under her spell because of this. Cynthia understands her attractiveness as a constructed ideal, and so she manages to find a partner who will not question or challenge the construction, and thus, to an extent, happiness.

The male characters in *Wives and Daughters*, with the exception of Osborne Hamley,¹³⁹ are the dupes who fall for the ideals of femininity embodied by Cynthia and her mother. The most central of them is Mr. Gibson, who not only marries Mrs. Gibson, but realizes his mistake. He relies on traditional gender expectations, but his own authority is strictly theoretical. Mr. Gibson’s adherence to convention is evinced in his succumbing to Mrs. Gibson’s outward manifestations of femininity, and in his views on the education and behavior of his daughter and

¹³⁹ Osborne Hamley, the novel’s Romantic hero, falls in love with the French nursery maid Aimée. While in theory she might appear to be the perfect passive woman, Aimée is, as Stoneman points out, “a genuine working woman with practical skills” (130), strong-willed enough to keep the squire from adopting her child. Roger Hamley and Mr. Preston, the male hero and villain of the story, both fall absolutely prey to Cynthia’s charms, suggesting just how powerful they are, as well as their mutability. These are, after all, two very different men. Hughes calls Roger’s infatuation with Cynthia a “suspension of intellect” and points to the irony that he, as a Darwinian character, is “subject to the biological determinism of sexual selection... driven by her brilliant “plumage” to instinctual rather than reasoned response” (102).

stepdaughter. His instructions to Molly's governess, Miss Eyre,¹⁴⁰ to not "teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child... After all, I am not sure reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name" (32) leave Miss Eyre "perplexed, but determined to be obedient" (32) as she infers what Mr. Gibson expects from women. What he says here is undermined, however, by Molly herself and the education she manages to wrangle by "struggling and fighting hard" (32) for French and drawing lessons and by reading "every book that came in her way," many garnered from her father's own "unusually good library" (32). Mr. Gibson's precepts on the education of females do not ultimately amount to much, as in practice they are not followed. His lectures on the role women should take in romance are similarly conventional. He is "almost cruel" in his "sternness" (426) as he tells Cynthia how absolutely he condemns her behavior toward the unfortunate Mr. Coxe: "I should not feel satisfied with the conduct of any girl... who could receive marked attentions from a young man with complacency, and so lead him to make an offer which she never meant to accept" (425). Mr. Gibson's channeling of Dr. Gregory-like sentiments¹⁴¹ reveals his anxiety over the power that she has, but it is ineffective as a warning to Cynthia, frightening her away from confessing to the Preston imbroglio and not preventing her from becoming engaged to Mr. Henderson before she is quite disengaged from Roger. Mr. Gibson's treatment of his daughters holds with convention but is useless

Mr. Gibson's façade of masculine, patriarchal control is at its most transparent when it comes to wooing the future Mrs. Gibson, and then living with the consequences of that marriage. Confounded by the difficulty that Mr. Coxe brings to light, that Molly is growing up and that he cannot properly control her sexuality or her position as marriageable, Mr. Gibson hits on the idea of marrying someone who can. In the actual courtship, however, he is specifically portrayed as passive: "Mr. Gibson was drifting into matrimony. He was partly aware of whither he was going; and partly it was like the soft floating movement of a dream. He was more passive than active in the affair; though, if his reason had not fully approved of the step... he could have made an effort without any great trouble to himself, and extricated himself without pain from the mesh of

¹⁴⁰ One cannot help but make the connection with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, with whom Gaskell's Miss Eyre shares a profession and the impoverished circumstances that make it necessary. There the similarities end, however, for Miss Eyre's position in the Gibson family is a comfortable one that includes little adventure or romance. She only features in *Wives and Daughters* briefly.

¹⁴¹ Dr. Gregory exhorts, "If you see evident proofs of a gentleman's attachment, and are determined to shut your heart against him, as you ever hope to be used with generosity by the person who shall engage your own heart, treat him honourably and humanely" (89).

circumstances” (90 -91). Mr. Gibson’s tumble into romance is in many ways similar to Cynthia’s with Mr. Preston: outside circumstances are responsible. However, there is the clear caveat that Mr. Gibson could easily change his course if he so chose. When he begins to think about Mrs. Gibson as a potential partner, “He remembered her as the very pretty Miss Clare” (104) and it is her physical attractions that continue to seduce him. He decides to propose because “her voice was so soft, her accent so pleasant” and “the harmonious colors of her dress, and her slow and graceful movements, had something of the same effect upon his nerves that a cat’s purring has upon some people’s” (107). The soothing is transitory, as Mr. Gibson begins to realize as soon as he has offered, and when he becomes aware that the Cumnors have been plotting the marriage, he tries “not to think about it, for he was aware that if he dwelt upon it, he might get to fancy all sorts of things, as to the conversation which had ended in his offer” (111). Mr. Gibson is willing to be enticed by Mrs. Gibson’s charms, but Mrs. Cumnor’s admission that she had hoped for such a union to be brought about undermines the genuineness of Mrs. Gibson’s sentiments, and it is only by refusing to think about it that Mr. Gibson can maintain his faith in her as an ideal woman. Once he has made his commitment, Mr. Gibson is stuck, and though he once or twice attempts to curtail his wife’s actions, most notably when she violates the sanctity of his profession in order to further her schemes for Cynthia’s marriage, for the most part he simply gives in to her control of their house. Mr. Gibson plays the part of the overbearing, controlling patriarch, but in reality allows his life to be ruled by his wife, though he professes to disagree with her in many things. Langland makes the important point that while he is quickly “disabused of his love for his new wife, Dr. Gibson can always assure himself of the ... advantages *he* has realized” (137), for marrying Mrs. Gibson advances him socially as much as it does Molly, and the refinements he dislikes mean that he ends up socializing with Lords and Squires, which he does not complain about. He is able to hold on to his strict principles concerning gender, but only by willfully remaining ignorant to his wife’s manipulations and letting her make all the practical arrangements of the household, especially concerning the marriages of the girls.

Though Cynthia and her mother prove in a certain sense to be exemplary heroines of conventional feminine conduct, they are not after all the heroines of Gaskell’s novel. That role falls to Molly Gibson who, in spite of her father’s attempts at patriarchal control, her stepmother’s mercenary concerns, her stepsister’s overshadowing charm and attraction and her beloved’s falling victim to it, and a variety of lies, secrets, and rumors that she becomes involved

in due to the shortcomings of other characters, maintains her own integrity as a genuine person who speaks her mind and refuses to affect feelings or graces to please anyone. Critical discussion of Molly concludes that she is no passively good heroine, but rather that in spite of the circumstances she ends up in, Molly acts to bring about positive results and in doing so defies conventions of femininity. However, she is not entirely a radical either. For example, Stoneman argues that even “as a dutiful daughter Molly has achieved a kind of self-affirmation through truth-telling amid the secret chambers of family life” (129), and Buchanan claims that Molly “embodies female gentleness and sensitivity, but she is not passive and self-sacrificing” (510). In Molly, Gaskell presents a character who is devoted to the genuine, and rails against what she considers false constructions, and who, in acting in accordance with her principles, reveals both the downfalls and advantages of constructed expectations of gender. From her childhood, Molly is portrayed as stubbornly and passionately expressive of her own feelings, a trait which does not mesh particularly well with expectations of femininity. The young Molly defends her governess from her teasing maid with “a violent passion of words” (34), but rather than appreciating her defender, Miss Eyre “began to reprove Molly for giving way to her passion, and the child thought it hard to be blamed for what she considered her just anger” (34). Miss Eyre’s reaction is qualified with the additional information that she is “sensitive and conscientious, and knew, from home experience, the evils of an ungovernable temper” (34). This insight serves to foreshadow the crisis that Molly will face in learning that as noble and honorable as her thoughts and feelings may be, as a young woman it is much more important that they be controllable. It is to Roger that her next rebellion against the constraints of feminine behavior is expressed, as she comes from her first interview with her new stepmother-to-be, feeling “heart sick” and that “thinking more of others’ happiness than her own was very fine; but did it not mean giving up her very individuality, quenching all the warm love, the keen desires, that made her herself?” (138). To repress her own reactions and act to please her father, Molly recognizes, is to strip herself of her feelings and her own identity. Her reply to Roger’s suggestion that thinking of others will eventually make her happier makes the point more starkly: “It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don’t see any end to it.... And as for the happiness you speak of, I shall never be happy again” (139). While there is an overly dramatic quality to this outburst, Roger notices that there is at the same time “an unconscious depth in what she had said” (139). With no way of responding to that

deeper truth, he finds it “easier to address himself to the assertion of the girl of seventeen, that she should never be happy again” (140). The depth, then, refers to the loss of identity Molly equates with regulating her actions and herself to reflect the desires of others, and this is a conclusion that seems to transcend her age to be a significant truth, not simply the thoughtless defiance of a teenage girl. Molly is presented with the problem of maintaining herself in the face of expectations, what other people, most significantly her father, want her to be. Her insistence throughout the rest of the novel on acting on her own sense of right, in defiance of his, and doing things that young women are not supposed to do, suggests that Gaskell, like Molly, condemns the sacrifice of a woman’s identity to the conventions of femininity. At the same time, however, Molly loves her father, and grows to love Roger, and wants to make each of them happy. In spite of herself, or rather, because of her desire to be herself, Molly is finally molded into a woman who does care for the desires of others over her own. She finally takes on the interests of others as her own, doing naturally what Cynthia and her mother do artificially.

Molly is at her most active, defiant, and heroic in the chapter titled “Molly Gibson to the Rescue,” where she stands up to Preston in order to get Cynthia’s love letters back for her. Her conviction that her position is the right one makes her “resolutely fierce,” as she tells Cynthia “I am not afraid of him...I will ask him for those letters, and see if he will dare to refuse me” (498). Molly’s righteousness overcomes any sense that it is not her place as a young woman to stand up for another woman’s honor, or to challenge a man’s. Hughes and Lund sum up what Molly does in rectifying Cynthia’s situation: “Molly has appropriated agency where money is concerned... defied her father... and interfered in a pledged courtship – all actions that generally lie beyond a Victorian woman’s sphere” (19-20). After she gets over her initial outrage, Molly does begin to feel a feminine “distaste” for the idea of confronting Preston; however, since “it was after all her own offer, she neither could nor would draw back from it; it might do good; she did not see how it could possibly do harm” (502). Molly sees action as the only means to solving the problem, while Cynthia has spent five years simply wishing it would go away of its own accord. Her brief moment of reluctance is conquered by the possibility that her actions may achieve good ends. Preston’s reaction suggests she is more convincing than is Cynthia: “His face fell a little. He looked so bitterly mortified that Molly was almost sorry for him” (506). He admits that Molly presents him with “very hard truths” (506), but he then reverts to the comfort of gender stereotypes and begins to question “if they are truths, that is to say.... young ladies are very fond

of the words “hate” and “detest.” I have known many who have applied them to men whom they were all the time hoping to marry” (506). Preston takes into account what Molly does not, the possibility that Cynthia is not being genuine and is simply taking the role of the teasing coquette to an extreme. Molly’s final strategy is to rely on the complicated powers accorded people in terms of both gender and class position. She declares, “I have thought of what I will do next. I give you fair warning. I will tell it all, from beginning to end, to Lady Harriet, and ask her to speak to her father. I feel sure that she will do it; and I don’t think you will dare to refuse Lord Cumnor” (507). Molly’s challenge is to Preston’s position, since Lord Cumnor is his employer and he knows his ungentlemanly¹⁴² behavior about the letters will lose him his job. Her plan includes the necessary intermediary of Lady Harriet, who has herself been the recipient of Molly’s truth-telling when Molly chastises her for her hypocrisy and disrespect of the Brownings (167-9), and who Molly knows harbors her own dislike for Preston. Molly cannot go to her own father because Cynthia, knowing he will disapprove of her behavior, has made her promise not to, and so Molly threatens to take the matter to someone else who has no power of her own over Preston, but who has an economically powerful father, whom she controls. Just as Cynthia uses Molly’s power of action, Molly uses Harriet’s power of influence. Molly is sure Lady Harriet will speak to her father; she does not even mention the certainty of the fact that he will listen to her.¹⁴³

By channeling her action through a woman, Molly seeks to avoid the harsh judgments of masculinity while reaping the benefits of its power. Stoneman points out that in coming to Cynthia’s rescue, Molly rewrites the traditional fairytales that are evoked at the beginning of *Wives and Daughters*: “Molly usurps the part of the younger son, who passes tests, fights duels, rescues damsels” (122). Boiko too sees Molly’s as a masculine role, suggesting that “Molly actually plays the chivalric gentleman on Cynthia’s behalf, risking her own reputation” (103). Preston recognizes that a great part of Molly’s ability to challenge him comes from her disregard

¹⁴² While Molly insists that it is Preston’s moral duty to give back the letters, until she threatens his job he clings to hints about his legal right to prosecute Cynthia for breach of promise. According to Ginger Frost, the laws made it possible for jilted lovers to sue for damages for emotional upset as well as being out of the marriage market for the period of the engagement, thus losing other chances (18). She points out that while there was precedent into the late eighteenth century for men suing women successfully (15-16), by the mid nineteenth century such behavior was deemed unmanly and laughable (53-5).

¹⁴³ Coral Lansbury discusses the extent of the power Lady Harriet holds in the novel, arguing that she “confounds every generalization made about women in the work, and controls society as effectively as Miss Deborah Jenkyns in *Cranford*” (109). As Matty controls society through different but effective means in *Cranford*, so Molly holds her own power through gaining Lady Harriet’s respect for her blunt honesty and faithfulness to her friends.

of gender in the situation: “there was something that struck him most of all perhaps, and which shows the kind of man he was – he perceived that Molly was as unconscious that he was a young man, and she a young woman, as if she had been a pure angel of heaven” (507). This thought “shows the kind of man” Preston is in that he understands, and willingly takes advantage of, societal expectations of gender. The comparison of Molly to a “pure angel” suggests not only her innocence of the sexual connotations that could be, and soon are to be, inferred from her private meeting with Preston, but also suggests a purity in the sense of being untainted by worries about gender, for after all, those heavenly angels are genderless. Her foray into the realm of the heroic masculine is put an end to by the arrival of Mr. Sheepshanks, who, “poking his whip at [Preston] in a knowing manner” (508), interprets the scene as the only kind he expects between a man and a woman – an illicit romance.

The consequences of Molly’s action, aside from the important achievement of saving Cynthia, seem like appropriate and conventional punishment for going beyond the limits of her gendered role, for she is reminded of that role by the censure of the town, because, as her angry father puts it, “Every one makes it their business to cast dirt on a girl’s name who has disregarded the commonest rules of modesty and propriety” (543). The society that condemns Molly for a clandestine courtship pronounces that she has “lost her character” (535) and treats her with “a very perceptible film of difference in... behavior to what it was formerly” so that she feels “acutely that she was only tolerated, not welcomed” (548). Molly is hurt by the slights of people who once treated her with respect; however, even as she feels their rudeness, Molly questions the nature and extent of these powers. She “wondered to herself whether this change in the behavior of her acquaintances was not a mere fancy of hers; whether, if she had never had that conversation with her father... she should have discovered the difference in their treatment of her” (549). Because she is on the lookout for it, Molly sees and is affected by the social punishment that is being inflicted, but it is so subtle in nature that she is not sure that she would have noticed it if her father, himself informed by Miss Browning, had not told her what people were saying. Molly is punished for behaving improperly according to expected codes of gentility¹⁴⁴ and gender by a society that reconstructs her actions to mean something else, and

¹⁴⁴ The gossips of Hollingford suggest that not only does Molly’s imagined secret courtship break gender codes, but also class codes. Mrs. Goodenough compares her to her own servant girl (527) and Phoebe Browning reveals the terrible news to her sister that “Molly and Mr. Preston were keeping company just as if she was a maid-servant and he was a gardener” (537). This equation works to insult Molly, but it also suggest the different freedoms accorded to

then adjusts its own behavior so subtly that only those in the know can understand it. It is a complicated instance of the use of social power as a response to social expectation, and Molly's questioning of her own ability to perceive it emphasizes this. It only works if one is invested in social constructions, and Molly is only so invested through her father and her friends. She cares because they do. When Lady Harriet sweeps in to set Hollingford to rights "in defence of a distressed damsel" (557), carries "off the unconscious Molly" (560), parades her up and down the main street in her company "like an inanimate chattel" (561), leaves her card with Molly's name on it for the Brownings, and does "everything properly, and according to full etiquette," she is confident that opinion will "veer round in Miss Gibson's favour" (561) as a result of her actions. Of course it does, because Lady Harriet has not only the knowledge but also the position to manipulate societal behavior, though Molly is entirely unconscious of the fact that she is being saved. The consequences of Molly's act of rescuing Cynthia serve to suggest that the judgments made against her and the expression of them are false and easily rectified by someone who has enough control to influence the social atmosphere through similarly artificial means. Molly's reaction to the slights, even though she still firmly believes in her actions, shows that in spite of its constructed and constructing nature, the power of society is an effective one, and one that requires a more savvy manager to manipulate it than honest, genuine Molly herself.

Marilyn Butler compares Molly's action and the reaction to it to Maria Edgeworth's novel *Helen* (1834), which she proves is one of Gaskell's sources for *Wives and Daughters*, and the differences between the works provide additional insight into Molly's actions. Butler's argument is that Cynthia is a less psychologically complex character than Edgeworth's Cecelia¹⁴⁵ and that similarly Molly, who is good where Cynthia is bad, is less interesting than her counterpart Helen. Butler points out that "the pain [Molly] receives from knowing she is gossiped about is not complicated, as it is in Helen's case, by a guilty conscience" (286). In creating a black and white moral contrast between Cynthia and Molly out of the more ambiguous relationship in *Helen*, Butler argues that Gaskell is concerned "with scoring a didactic point" (287). Butler claims that Molly's illness "is not the collapse of a conscience-stricken sinner, as in *Helen*. Molly collapses not because she has suffered too much but because she has done too

working-class women, who might be expected to hold clandestine courtships, but precisely because they would be prevented by their employers from having open ones.

¹⁴⁵ Lynch and Colon refute this claim, suggesting Butler misses the very complex issue of what they see as Cynthia's mental illness (51).

much, a very different thing” (287). This, in my reading, is precisely Gaskell’s point. While Edgeworth’s Helen is guilt-stricken for the lies that she has told, Molly’s guilt comes about because of the action that she undertakes. To Hollingford and the world in general it comes to the same thing as Helen’s lie, but while Helen is left to deal with her own conscience more so than the censorious world, Molly has to face the false interpretations of that world. The black and white contrast between Molly and Cynthia is action vs. passivity. What is really significant, if one compares the situation in *Wives and Daughters* to that in *Helen* and also to the other source that has been identified, Swedish novelist Fredrika Bremer’s *A Diary*,¹⁴⁶ is that though in all three a young woman is faced with the task of saving a close female friend’s reputation which is threatened by the existence of incriminating love letters, only in Gaskell’s novel is it accomplished through the direct and decided action of a woman confronting a man, with no regard to gender. In *Helen*, Helen is the passive foil for Cecelia’s lies to her husband; there is no confrontation. In the more dramatic encounter in *A Diary*, the innocent Selma does indeed confront the man who holds her cousin Flora’s letters for blackmail, but she has supernatural help as she is possessed by the spirit of the blackmailer’s dead bride. Gaskell’s addition is Molly’s rational decision that her action can do some good in helping Cynthia. She has not Helen’s guilt, because she does not lie (although she does refuse to reveal secrets). Similarly, she has not Selma’s absolute innocence, because she acts of her own accord without considering herself sacrificed, and expects to be taken seriously.¹⁴⁷ The alterations in the episode suggest that Gaskell is interested in the construction of guilt as it relates to gender, not the moral question of whether lying to save a friend constitutes guilt in the first place. The question is whether acting in a manner that appears improper does.

The final aspect of Molly’s character that both separates her from Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia and establishes her as heroine outside of the specific act of saving Cynthia is her continual devotion to hard work. It is not only that Molly acts in a time of crisis, but that she is always willing to work and help in more everyday, and feminine, ways. Boiko argues that “Gaskell foregrounds a willingness to work” (98) in *Wives and Daughters* as a mark of middle-class gentility, and a way to contrast ““true” gentility with the idleness that was the prerogative

¹⁴⁶ Translated into English by Gaskell’s friend Mary Howitt in 1844 (Butler 278-9).

¹⁴⁷ After the scene with the blackmailer where he is impelled to return the letters, Selma encounters the man she loves. The compromising position of being discovered as a young woman leaving the private rooms of a man is “too much for so fine feeling and pure a nature to bear” (Bremer 196) and Selma falls into a faint that takes weeks and the guarantee that her lover still respects her for her to recover from.

of the aristocracy” (98). I suggest that similarly work is a measure of character in terms of gender, and that Molly’s hard work finally provides a more attractive ideal than Cynthia’s purely dependant charms. That Mrs. Gibson detests the thought of work has already been made evident in her dreams of marriage as her refuge from toil. Cynthia too does not work in the same way that Molly does. As Molly “employed herself busily tying up carnations, and Cynthia gathered flowers in her careless, graceful way” (341), Cynthia herself points out the difference. She instructs Osborne Hamley, who is himself doing nothing at all, “Molly, you see, devotes herself to the useful, and I to the ornamental” (341). Molly’s usefulness is a kind of agency that Cynthia, though powerful as an ornament, lacks. Perhaps the most essential work that Molly does is as a nurse to the ailing Mrs. Hamley and then as a translator¹⁴⁸ and intermediary between Squire Hamley and his new French daughter-in-law, as well as taking care of the Squire in his grief. As Stoneman points out, this is a “hard slog of domestic management” and of “exhausting work” (124) that Molly performs at Hamley Hall. The Squire’s reaction when her father takes his ill and tired daughter home is that he “felt he had never known her value, he thought, til now” (612) and Roger invites her back afterwards, saying “I think you could help us at home” (625). Having come to realize how much Molly does for him and his family, the Squire even tries to encourage Roger to woo her, saying rather bluntly, “Don’t you think you could turn your thoughts upon Molly Gibson, Roger” (666). This is the same man who earlier in the novel asks Mr. Gibson to watch that his daughters do not fall in love with his sons, to “keep off love; it can come to no good” (386) because of the difference in their status. He himself declares to Roger “I daresay I should ha’ been angry enough at the time, but the lassie would ha’ found her way to my heart, as never ... [Cynthia] could ha’ done” (666). It is Molly’s hard work and genuine care for his family that makes the Squire change his mind, but it takes her leaving and the comparison of her genuine devotion with Cynthia’s inconstancy for him to see it. Similarly, Molly’s unaffected care for his family and her real interests in his discoveries, along with the revelation of Cynthia’s falsity, are an important component in what finally attracts Roger to Molly.

By the end of the novel, Molly has been set up as the right romantic choice for Roger, the woman he should have seen all along instead of being blinded by Cynthia’s beauty and charm and apparent fascination. However, it takes the negative example of Cynthia’s changeableness, the influence of Mrs. Gibson’s sense of taste and decorum on Molly’s physical appearance, and

¹⁴⁸ The French that her father did not want Molly to learn here comes in very handy, as Hughes points out (104).

the fear that she will not love him after his foolish mistake, to combine to win Roger's heart. Langland demonstrates how Mrs. Gibson is responsible for Molly's transformation from awkward to beautiful, noting that where Roger is concerned, the "heart will not be enraptured when the eye is offended" (138), and concluding that the novel reveals "how preoccupation with dress leads to social advancement because sexual attraction is inscribed on the body through social signs" (138). Hughes and Lund argue that Gaskell "inducts Molly into the cult of feminine beauty even as she suggests that this reflection of the body cannot ultimately define Molly, whose inward sense of herself is foreign to what she sees in the mirror" (33). However, the fact remains that Mrs. Gibson's attention to Molly's dress and appearance, combined with the skills of Lady Harriet's maid, make her suddenly "a very pretty girl" (649) who Roger barely recognizes and who makes him feel "a sort of desire to obtain her good opinion in a manner very different to his old familiar friendliness" (649). Whether or not Molly is changed in her own eyes by her transformed appearance, she is changed in Roger's. Her extreme anxiety that people will think that she is scheming to catch Roger as a husband also effects a change in Molly's personality, but ironically her standoffish behavior towards him is what entices Roger. He is ultimately pushed to ask if he has offended her, and her reply, "You've never vexed me in my whole life, Roger," said she, looking straight at him for the first time in many days" (669) allows him enough hope for her love that he admits it to her father. The awareness of the position that Roger stands in relation to herself in the eyes of Mrs. Goodenough and Hollingford in general, as a potential husband she is trying to catch, makes Molly's behavior change from her usual sisterly affection that Roger takes for granted into what might seem even like coquettish denial. The potential that Molly does not like him anymore works to engage Roger's commitment. His reaction is comparable to the situation she faces earlier with Mr. Coxe, who returns to Hollingford to win her hand. Coxe's "precipitancy in showing his feelings" (421) along with Mrs. Gibson's attempts to help him with his suit, quickly frighten Molly into aloofness. She "lost her open friendliness of manner, and began to shrink away from him" (422). Coxe explains to her father, "her manner to me every time I endeavored to press my suit a little – it was more than coy, it was absolutely repellant" (423). Molly does not wish to marry Coxe, and she successfully convinces him that he does not want to marry her. Her very similar reaction to Roger, however, works to convince him the more of his loss. Because she is so insistent on being herself and avoiding romantic machinations, circumstances have to be arranged so that Molly acts coy.

Gaskell cannot negotiate her success on the marriage market without instituting some feminine deference and even falseness of feeling, the trick is she does it without making Molly party to it, but rather Molly's reactions to the manipulations of others force her to participate in the power games of romance.

Molly's overt, stubborn insistence on being true to herself and acting in genuine accordance with her own feelings instead of to please socially instituted expectations stands as a challenge to conventional gender roles. However, the true Molly is in many ways a conduct book wife for Roger. She is an anti-feminine heroine in her rejection of passive attraction and charm for the explicit sake of pleasing others and her insistence on taking on the masculine roles of honesty, outright authority, and principle. But, Gaskell tones her down by endowing her with the very feminine capacity to love and care and reflect the interests of those she cares for in a genuine way. Molly does naturally what Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia do as a kind of performance of the expectations of femininity, but in doing so she is also reacting to their performance. Gaskell suggests that there is a lot wrong with the ways in which Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia go about winning husbands, and that feminine withholding and even passively allowing men to be charmed by them, not to mention appearing to passively charm when they are actually working at it, is deceptive and eventually will be found out and lead to unhappy marriages. However, she also recognizes that the power to please is a vital one and that if men such as Mr. Gibson and Roger keep falling for it then women such as Mrs. Gibson will keep exercising it. She illustrates the conundrums of power, honesty, and femininity in the complications Molly faces as she attempts to defy her stepmother's influence while falling under Cynthia's. At the same time she envies Cynthia Roger's love, which she sees has been gained as a result of Cynthia's power, while attempting to actively correct wrongs and keep secrets within a society that is eager to interpret her actions within the only realm it recognizes: her value and reputation as a young woman in the market for a husband. Molly is active, and acts and speaks according to her principles, but even she is silenced and curtailed by how people believe a woman of her position should behave. She finally wins the heart of Roger by showing him the distinction between genuine and constructed behavior, but not until after she has, in his eyes at least, been made to fit more neatly into expectations of femininity.

Cranford, "A Fear for the Future," and *Wives and Daughters* examine the ways in which constructed gender roles work in the middle-class, feminine, domestic realm, allowing for a

analysis of feminine agency on its own terms, in its own sphere. In *Cranford* and “A Fear,” Gaskell is transparent about her interrogation of gender roles; they are stories firstly about the definitions of woman, but also about the ways in which people of both sexes garner power, authority, and agency through constructions of gender identity in contrast with and ultimately symbiosis with the idea of a different gender. In *Cranford* she humorously and confidently asserts that both masculinity and femininity are roles that people take on, and that the official power and responsibility of the one allows the other to be less restricted in kindness and open-mindedness and potential for change. In “A Fear,” she takes up the possibility of a change in femininity, a closing of the gap as women become more like men. This allows her to point to both the ridiculous nature of certain gender conventions and to the utility of an officially powerless gender. The story suggests the problem that masculinity might look like the more attractive option, but that femininity is necessary to making it so. While *Cranford* leaves the reader feeling that it is ultimately better to be a woman, “A Fear” argues that men have the easier role, with the important caveat that they have to be a little bit blind or foolish in order to fully embrace and enjoy it. *Wives and Daughters* comes at the issues from another perspective, as young heroines are presented coming to terms with feminine identity and its relationship to masculinity in the shadow of examples of the difficulties of these negotiations, and the possibility that they do not work out. The value of feminine passive power is more ambiguous as the effects of such power, on masculine hearts at any rate, are revealed to be potentially devastating. The easy solution that tries to separate feminine influence into categories of real or false is complicated by the difficulty of telling them apart, as well as by the difficulty of establishing feminine identity apart from its reflection of male affection. Awareness of the constructed nature of gender roles and of power itself finally becomes the key to achieving both romantic love and a comfortable sense of individual identity. Gaskell solves the problem that arises in “A Fear,” that women might begin to feel that being feminine is not as much fun as being masculine, by suggesting that aspects of femininity such as kindness, sympathy, and devotion, are not only constructions, but they can become genuine at the same time. And, she insists on active agency as something that women can and do participate in, in spite of and because of the limits that are set on them by social expectations of gender.

Conclusion

“She must not hide her gift in a napkin”: The Agency of Novels and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

In looking at Gaskell's fiction in terms of the agency granted women, I have considered the ways in which she adheres to the concept of the separation of spheres and the separation of genders in order to give value to the domestic and the feminine as necessary sources of agency and perspective. This ideological stance is complicated by Gaskell's own lived example, however, for though she was a wife and mother and in these ways a conventional domestic angel, she was also undeniably a professional author and one who found fulfillment in that career. The accolades and criticisms, as well as the matter of financial profit for her work, were all matters that Gaskell had to negotiate specifically as a woman author. Her private correspondence reveals Gaskell's devotion in her own life to the traditionally feminine role, and the fulfillment she found in it, but also a sense that writing was likewise just as important a duty. These ideas are crystallized in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), in which Gaskell attempts to justify Brontë's career as an author in light of her duties as a daughter. In doing so she reveals the difficulty of reconciling the two trajectories and the two sets of expectations that come with them. Trying to prove that Brontë did not abandon her domestic duties in order to pursue her writing, Gaskell ends up showing how unfulfilling those domestic ideals were to Brontë. On the other hand, though, she portrays the oppressive nature of the isolated life that Brontë lived, both physically at Haworth parsonage and mentally through her family's eccentricity and her own shyness, as the necessary fertile ground from which her particular genius for fiction sprung. As with the physical, sympathetic, and emotional agency of her female characters which arise from their particular positions of supposed powerlessness and even oppression, the ability to create stirring and more importantly effective fiction for Gaskell is tied to a woman's investment in the domestic role she is expected to play and the perspective and way of thinking that she brings from that place. Effective art, like other more immediate forms of agency, is shown to be cultivated in a realm outside of official power.

The issue is further complicated by the consequences of authorship and the power, celebrity, and responsibility that Gaskell associates with it. In a letter to her close friend Eliza Fox in 1850, Gaskell ventures to suggest that a woman might be called to pursue a career other

than that of devoted wife or mother. She says, “I do believe we have all some appointed work to do, wh[ic]h no one else can do so well; wh[ic]h is *our* work; what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God” (107). Here, fiction and the women who write it become God’s workers and a means of influencing the world with their ideas. Fiction, as a subtle and non-threatening influencing rather than ordering medium, is a particularly appropriate means by which to disseminate feminine ways of seeing and feeling. The difficulty is keeping the perspective pure and unsullied by the power and more conventionally masculine perspective that come along with literary recognition. Gaskell manages to renegotiate and escape the double bind for Charlotte Brontë and especially for herself by believing in the agency of fiction and the ability of books to communicate and inspire. Presenting the feminine perspective in fiction, drawing on the feminine perspective in life, is a way of doing this. Gaskell acknowledges the conflict between domestic devotion and a writing career as a physical one, as both require time and energy, but also a psychological one, as the participation in the public sphere can have an effect on a woman’s appreciation for her usual home life, and on her way of thinking. However, in spite of the complications, she insists that conventional feminine domestic ways of life are necessary to create the perspective that fiction can then disseminate and share. In this way, Gaskell negotiates a role for femininity that transcends the individual domestic role at the same time as it insists on its importance.

Her letters indicate that Gaskell enjoyed her own participation in the conventionally feminine world, and her domestic experience as wife, mother, and housekeeper was one from which she drew strength, confidence, fulfillment, and inspiration. There is no sense, even during the most domesticated periods when her letters are filled with children and chores, of the idle lady at home making useless things, languishing from boredom, or feeling that what she accomplishes is worthless. During the early years of her marriage Gaskell writes to a friend “I’ve made four flannel petticoats and I don’t know how many preserves and pickles, which are so good and successful I am sure it is my vocation to be a house-keeper” (84). While this claim is light-hearted, we would be remiss to ignore the serious pride Gaskell takes in household success. Details of home and family life continue to be the centre of her letters throughout her life, and she asks the same from her correspondents. One letter from Marianne she declares “charming” because it is “full of detail, and very satisfactory” (143). At another point she implores her to “always describe *dress*, it amuses me and relaxes my mind” (615). She congratulates Marianne

again for a letter which “had all the interest of a novel,” saying “We quaked about your gown, we were in despair” (866). Perhaps teasing Marianne for dramatizing the situation, she also clearly appreciates it and identifies the connection between the stuff of home life and the stuff of novels. Gaskell perceives this thirst for details as a feminine desire, writing to her future son-in-law Thurston Holland, “you are about as good a specimen of masculine letter-writing as I know in condescending to particulars” (524), and acknowledging that men are supposed to be less likely to value those apparently trivial things, although suggesting that this might not have a basis in reality. The domestic experience, then, as presented through Gaskell’s personal letters, is not one of monotonous drudgery or listless nothingness, but rather a scope for action and interest, and a place where important things happen, or rather where everything is important. The sometimes laughingly apologetic tone with which she asks for and offers “homely details” betrays her awareness of society’s disposition to dismiss these things as trivial, but also a confidence that they are not, and that she is not the only person who believes this to be the case. She locates her own diversion, relaxation, and inspiration in the small events that make up peoples’ lives, and infuses these events with importance, keeping in mind that to an extent it is their triviality that lends them weight.

Gaskell did not find the balance between private and public, between intellectual and domestic duties with absolute ease. She writes to Eliza Fox that “the discovery of one’s exact work in the world is the puzzle” (109), admitting “I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women” (109). Gaskell and Fox are concerned in this epistolary conversation with how to fulfill all the responsibilities they felt, inside and outside of the home, and Gaskell’s somewhat facetious almost-longing for the good old days suggests the overwhelming nature of the task. While writing is a duty that involves complications and difficulties, caring for her family, while it too is complex and often overwhelming, exhausting, and difficult, is much more clearly defined as a woman’s duty.¹⁴⁹ In a similar discussion with Lady Kay Shuttleworth, Gaskell thanks God “that I am a wife and a mother and that I am so happy in the performance of those clear and defined duties” (118), but though she appreciates the simplicity of knowing what a wife at home is expected to do, in

¹⁴⁹ While Gaskell herself occasionally complains that she is tired or exhausted or overwhelmed by her household, the only complaints of being tired of a particular task is in reference to her writing. She cries to Eliza Fox, with perhaps a touch of exaggeration but also a sense of real frustration, “I’ve been as nearly dazed and crazed with this c___, d___ be h___ to it story as can be. I’ve been sick of writing” (*Letters* 325), and looks upon editing *The Life* for the third edition as “my weary and oppressive task” (*Letters* 461).

comparison to what a woman working outside of the home can expect, Gaskell does not see it as the necessary end of a woman's life or ambitions. Particularly, she worries that her daughters have diverse interests and different kinds of work to do. When her daughter Florence is eighteen years old, recently home from school, and "a beautifully ready workwoman, a capital shopper &c: and *prefers* doing all these sorts of little housewife things to anything presenting the least intellectual *effort* or requiring perseverance" (632), Gaskell desires that she become more balanced in her pursuits. As a precaution that Florence "does not fall into 'young-lady-life'" Gaskell assigns her "Masters, & regular reading" and is herself "trying not to fall into the temptation of 'making her of use'" (632). The danger presented as "young-lady-life" is associated with being too much involved with the domestic side of things, and ignoring the intellectual. However, Gaskell admits her own inclination to use the domestic talents that Florence possesses because they would be so useful to the household. Domesticity is shown to be the easier and the more useful route for both mother and daughter, but when it comes to her own family Gaskell will not allow it to be the only avenue to female success and fulfillment.

Gaskell strongly believed fiction could benefit from the experiences of domestic womanhood. In a long and sympathetic response to a woman who applied to her for advice on writing fiction and help in getting it published in 1862, Gaskell offers instead the idea that

The exercise of a talent or power *is* always a great pleasure; but one should weigh well whether this pleasure may not be obtained by the sacrifice of some duty.

When I had *little* children I do not think I could have written stories, because I should have become too much absorbed in my *fictitious* people to attend to my *real* ones. (*Letters* 694-5)

Critics caution that Gaskell's opinions in this letter do not altogether correspond with her own actions, but still they are worth considering as sincere advice.¹⁵⁰ She offers the encouragement that experience will help any woman to become a better author, claiming that "when you are forty... you will write ten times as good a novel as you could do now, just because you will have gone through so much more of the interests of a wife and mother" (695). Gaskell's view is both that domestic duties must come first, and that they are what contribute to a stock of knowledge and feeling that is essential to good writing. In this way, domestic women are positioned to

¹⁵⁰ Jenny Uglow notices that Gaskell "herself never really stopped writing stories when her children were small" (128).

become great novelists, through their particular experience of life. Further, she suggests, “a good writer must have *lived* an active & sympathetic life if she wishes her books to have strength and vitality in them” (695). The potential of honing the skills necessary for good writing is a kind of carrot that suggests that Gaskell recognizes that devotion to house and family is going to be perceived as a sacrifice. She says that her advice “is, I fear, disheartening enough” (695). But, she insists it is a sacrifice worth making for the perspective the potential author will gain as well as for her family. Gaskell further suggests the domestic can be literary, claiming “there is plenty of poetry and association” about what she is careful to call “the household *arts*” (695 my emphasis). Her connections between the two careers in spirit and especially in potential, however, make the important point that the one way of being and thinking promotes and encourages the skills necessary for the other. Devotion to the domestic will foster the agency of authorship, because it exposes one to essential aspects of life and to a valuable perspective.

Gaskell’s discussion of the relationship between a woman author’s literary career and her domestic one, which we have seen surface from time to time in these letters, comes to the forefront in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The potential sense of sacrifice and *ennui* of enforced domestic devotion is also more apparent in *The Life* than in Gaskell’s letters. In it Gaskell attempts to justify her friend’s literary aspirations by showing how effective she was in the domestic role of daughter at the same time. Gaskell is careful to emphasize that Brontë did not allow her writing to interfere with her domestic responsibilities, which always took precedence. She presents the “testimony” of those who lived with Brontë, “that never was the claim of any duty, never was the call of another for help, neglected for an instant” (306). She gives a specific example in which Brontë, “too dainty a housekeeper to put up with” the eyes left in the potatoes by the blind but stubborn old housemaid, breaks “off in the full flow of interest and inspiration in her writing [to] carefully cut out the specks in the potatoes” (306). In showing the world Brontë the woman, however, Gaskell also shows the drudgery, exhaustion, and dissatisfaction that Brontë often felt in playing that traditional role. As Gaskell presents it, Brontë’s devotion to the household consistently reads like martyrdom, and Gaskell more than once suggests that domestic responsibilities contribute to Brontë’s exhaustion and to her sickness.¹⁵¹ Most oppressive,

¹⁵¹ For example, in *The Life*, Gaskell describes Brontë’s return to Haworth after a visit to Harriet Martineau as a return to the dangerous conditions both of sickness and of housework: “She then returned home, and immediately began to suffer from her old enemy, sickly and depressing headache. This was all the more trying to bear, as she was obliged to take an active role in the household work” (438). Gaskell makes a similar connection between Brontë’s

though, is the sense of mental fatigue related to the necessity of Brontë's being at Haworth to keep her father's house, especially after her siblings are dead. The monotony of daily life in the isolated parsonage is set in contrast with the short visits that Brontë, as a celebrated author, makes to the cities and to new friends. When Gaskell records that after a trip to London, Brontë "returned to her quiet home and her noiseless daily duties" (394), that silence is anything but golden. Gaskell describes the monotony and the toll it takes:

Her life at Haworth was so unvaried that the postman's call was the event of her day. Yet she dreaded the great temptation of centering all her thoughts upon this one time, and losing her interest in the smaller hopes and employments of the remaining hours. Thus she conscientiously denied herself the pleasure of writing letters too frequently, because the answers (when she received them) took the flavour out of the rest of her life; or the disappointment, when the replies did not arrive, lessened her energy for her home duties. (395)

The bleak self-sacrifice of the woman who requires more intellectual stimulation than her quiet dutiful life with her father can provide but who also fears that such stimulation will make the rest of her time more unbearable suggests that Gaskell is aware that the expectation that woman's ultimate duty is in the home can be problematic. It also demonstrates the absolute and debilitating boredom that could exist or be perceived to exist in playing such a role.

The discrepancy between Gaskell's celebration of and reliance on her own domesticity and her more intensive questioning of Brontë's situation suggests the comfort of distance as well as the influence of Brontë's letters and her own feelings about her vocation. Frances Twinn argues that "whilst Gaskell tried to portray Haworth realistically, she was continuously conscious of Charlotte's view of her home as remote, lonely, and isolated" (155). When she visited in 1853 Gaskell found life at Haworth "Monotonous enough in sound, but not a bit in reality" (*Letters* 246). But, she presents ample evidence of Brontë's own feelings from her letters, overwhelming any impressions of her own that suggest otherwise. In one example, Brontë writes to Gaskell, "You charge me to write about myself. What can I say on that precious topic? Nothing happens to me" (459). However, Gaskell's interpretation of Brontë's words is also telling. She compares a birthday letter Brontë wrote after *Jane Eyre* had been accepted for publication to one

illnesses and her feminine self-sacrifice, reporting that there "was illness all through the Parsonage household... She herself was outwardly the strongest of the family, and all domestic exertion fell for a time upon her shoulders" (460). For Gaskell, Brontë's sickness is certainly exacerbated by her domestic responsibilities.

written two years prior. In the second letter Brontë offers the very cautious optimism “that sorrow must come some time to everybody” and that “those who exhaust the dregs early, who drink the lees before the wine, may reasonably hope for more palatable draughts to succeed” (342). Gaskell’s comment on the letter attributes this outlook to Brontë’s success in finding a publisher for *Jane Eyre*: “there must have been a modest consciousness of having ‘done something’ present in her mind” (342). This she sets in contrast with the earlier letter, in which Brontë moans, “My youth is gone like a dream; and very little use have I ever made of it. What have I done these past thirty years? Precious little” (313). Gaskell cements the connection she has made between the change in attitude and Brontë’s blossoming literary career, saying “reading it with our knowledge of what she had done, we perceive the difference between her thoughts and what they were a year or two ago, when she said ‘I have done nothing’” (342). Brontë’s accomplishment in completing *Jane Eyre* and having it published thus stands out as something above the other things she had done in her life up to that point, and it is Gaskell who makes this judgment. This excitement over and privileging of Brontë’s literary career over her domestic and daughterly duties, as finally something done, is in many ways at odds with Gaskell’s proclaimed purpose in emphasizing that feminine side of Brontë, and with her insistence on the value of traditionally feminine duties in her own life and in her fiction.

Gaskell’s presentation of Brontë’s conflicted responsibilities suggests her own internal conflict between her sense of duty to the domestic and to the public. In one of the most commonly cited passages from *The Life*, Gaskell lays out the issues facing working women, suggesting the life of a female author “becomes divided into two parallel currents” which are “difficult to be reconciled” (334). Unlike when a man switches professions and simply re-devotes his time to the new job while the old is filled by someone else, Gaskell claims that a woman who takes on duties in a sphere other than the home is still bound to her original domestic duties as well. She says, “A woman’s principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shirk from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin” (334). Many critics suggest that this is Gaskell justifying her own career and her own home life and much as Brontë’s. Susan Calvioni sums up the usual argument, claiming “consciously or unconsciously, [Gaskell] is defending her own decision to pursue a writing

career despite the demands of her family life” (88). Pamela Parker makes the similar case that “Gaskell’s reinterpretation of Charlotte Brontë as paradoxically both private and public was intricately involved in her own self-construction as a woman writer and public figure” (77), and Linda Peterson points out that Gaskell is “Perhaps speaking for herself as much as for her subjects” as she “attempts to reconcile these “separate duties” through a rewriting of the New Testament parable of the talents” (66). Through writing the life of her friend¹⁵² who is less interested in napkins than she herself appears to be, Gaskell more directly addresses the double bind that women authors and working women in general face. She presents Brontë’s case as a successful one, claiming in her discussion of how the different currents can and must be reconciled, she “put into words what Charlotte Brontë put into actions” (334), although the monotonous melancholy that pervades descriptions of the domestic hearth at Haworth suggest that the compromise was not a particularly happy one. Charlotte’s grief over the deaths of her siblings must be allowed to account for much of this sadness, but it is also written as arising from Brontë’s dissatisfaction with her life at home, especially after she has achieved some fame as an author. The devotion to home and domesticity is not essential to all women, and it can be soured by a taste of a different kind of power.

As is evident in her biography of Brontë, Gaskell was concerned with the image that could be inferred of women authors through the stories that they chose to write, and looked upon fiction as both a reflection of its author and a means by which women could extend their influence beyond their own domestic sphere and thus bring their perspective to a larger audience. Gaskell was aware of the judgment that could befall an author personally based on his or her books, and she herself practices it. For example, despite trying hard not to admire George Eliot’s work because she found the fact that she lived with but was not married to George Henry Lewes offensive, Gaskell eventually has to give in, saying “I can’t help liking her, – *because* she wrote those books.... There is not a wrong word or a wrong thought in them” (*Letters* 594). Conversely, Gaskell’s assessment of Charlotte Brontë depends on separating her personally from what she has written. Gaskell claims she is “after all so much better, & more faithful than her books” (*Further Letters* 90). She distinguishes her own writing from Brontë’s by claiming “she puts all her naughtiness in her books, and I put all my goodness. I am sure she works off a great

¹⁵² As Juliet Barker points out, Gaskell was keen to write the biography of her friend and was “delighted to receive Patrick [Brontë]’s letter” asking her to do it, for “the idea of writing a memoir of her friend had already occurred to her” (104).

deal of what is morbid *into* her writing and *out* of her life; and my books are so far better than I am that I often feel ashamed of having written them and as if I were a hypocrite” (228), implying that what an author writes has the power to be something better – or worse – to the world at large than what the author as a person is. Books can be examples of rightness. Regarding her own writing, Gaskell describes a tension between feeling thus personally judged, and the conviction that her books have the ability and so the responsibility to do good in the world. Her reactions and responses to the criticism and the praise engendered by two of her most controversial books, *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, claim that her point in writing them was indeed to provoke practical change. Of *Mary Barton* she says “I am almost frightened at my own action in writing it,” saying that her goal was to call “attention to the existence of such evils” (*Letters* 67) as she perceived in the world of industrial relations. Gaskell says of *Ruth*, which she had heard was being burned because of its scandalous content, “I can’t think how it is, that I who am such an errant coward, *must* always go headlong into people’s black books; and good people’s too,” but she counteracts this denial of agency or intention to cause trouble by saying “Well! If I have but got the smallest edge of the wedge in, anyhow, I will be thankful to God” (*Further Letters* 84). The latter suggestion shows that Gaskell’s real perception of herself and her books is not cowardly at all, but that she intentionally promotes a certain viewpoint and response to the traditionally taboo subject of the fallen woman. Gaskell suffers the personal consequences in order that people begin to see things from the perspective she has presented. Books then take on a greater scale of agency than do personal actions and behaviors, which puts ultimate value on personal, individual, unsung actions.

In the midst of the outpouring of reaction to *Mary Barton*, much of which was negative and some quite spiteful, Gaskell clung to the advice she received in a letter from Thomas Carlyle, who wrote “May you live long to write good books, or *do silently good actions which in my sight is far more indispensable*”¹⁵³ (*Letters* 70). What might now sound rather like an insult disguised as a compliment Gaskell takes as a sincere and valuable piece of truth because it fits with her own philosophy. Gaskell’s anxiety about her own motivations for writing and the inevitable connections made between authors and works can be read through those that she assigned to Bronte, and what she left out. As Peterson points out, Gaskell “excludes financial

¹⁵³ The emphasis on the phrase is Gaskell’s. Carlyle himself stresses only the word “*silently*” (*Carlyle Letters* vol. 23: 155)

details from Brontë's letters to her publisher, and shows her subject as much more interested in ideas than profits" (68). Gaskell was herself concerned with the remunerative aspect of her writing career. She made sure she was paid what she had arranged, and used the money for her pleasure and fulfillment, and that of her daughters.¹⁵⁴ In her justification of authorship as fit work for women, though, Gaskell leaves money out of it. Similarly, a desire for approbation or fame has to be checked. In an 1859 letter to her friend Charles Bosanquet,¹⁵⁵ Gaskell explains why she thinks it might be dangerous for a group of Bible women¹⁵⁶ to be encouraged to keep journals of their experiences. She says, "I think it they will find that it will destroy the simplicity and unconscious goodness of the women" (587). Her reasoning is that in allowing themselves to convert the statistics and facts of their experiences into stories, the women may easily fall into the temptation to dramatize events beyond the truth of what actually happened. Even if they do not, the story becomes a motive in itself, which for Gaskell interferes with the purity of the good work that they are doing. It is a strange worry coming from a novelist, who after all depends on stories and drama for her success. It is revelatory of Gaskell's general principle of what constitutes goodness and good actions as well, expressing the idea that simple and uncelebrated actions, done for the sake of the beneficiary and leaving out the ego of the doer, are the most noble and important. It is particularly significant that these are women who are expected to maintain this course of "unconscious goodness," without thought to their own glory or even entertainment. Gaskell's own career involved her in both celebration and condemnation, which pleased and upset her, but she maintained that the purpose of the story must not be about the writer, but about affecting some other kind of good in the larger world. Books have to be a means to an end. To become a known and published author is to sacrifice some unconscious goodness, like the Bible women, and to take on some responsibility for doing good in a larger sense to make up for that sacrifice.

Gaskell's letters and *The Life* reveal that personally she was concerned with how a woman author fit into the gendered convention of separate spheres. Though she recognizes complications and anxieties and frustrations, especially as she presents Charlotte Brontë's story,

¹⁵⁴ Gaskell used her earnings for trips to the Continent, often, as when *The Life* was published, to escape from the critical reception of her books. She also used her earning for the down-payment on a house she bought for her retirement and as a legacy for her unmarried daughters.

¹⁵⁵ Bosanquet was a London merchant, economist, and essayist.

¹⁵⁶ Churches and charities employed these women to encourage interest in the Bible, Church, and Christianity among the poor.

she is ultimately able to locate writing itself – a profession that veers dangerously into the masculine territory of politics, economics, and public responsibilities – as a necessary vocalization of feminine perspectives. For Gaskell, fiction should be effective and do something towards changing the viewpoints of its readership. It is an essential aspect of her sense of the agency of women's fiction that it be rooted in domestic experience and in the feelings, ideals, and beliefs that are created and cultivated there. Women's fiction is justified by the fact that it reveals a different perspective on human relationships, a perspective that can be brought to bear on traditionally masculine issues. However, in entering into a more public realm, that perspective can be compromised by the criticism or the accolades it may garner there, or be contaminated by a taste of power or fame. In the attempt to challenge or replace the hegemonic power ideology, the new ideology runs the risk of creating similarly ineffectual individuals and of facing similar critique. Gaskell creates a careful balancing act for herself as she tries to give value and voice to the feminine on a large scale without ruining the purity of that voice. To write fiction as a woman is in a way to betray the feminine ideal that I have argued Gaskell promotes throughout her writing, to suggest that in order to be important a person has to transcend the personal, individual, feminine world. Gaskell's anxiety about conflation of author and work reflects her desire to keep the feminine perspective pure and unsullied by issues like pride or anger over criticism. But, fiction is also a means by which to disseminate feminine ways of thinking, and to make the feminine perspective, which is nurtured and honed in the personal domestic realm, heard and felt on a level beyond the individual.

Examining gender and agency in Gaskell's fiction allows for a more subtle understanding of gender and proto-feminism in the period. Gaskell's perspective does not simply buy into religious or essentialist justifications for gender separation, but instead examines its social utility. Her psychologically astute analysis of how and why categories are functional as well as how they can be problematic, along with her distinctively strong investment in feminine perspectives as valuable alternative ways of functioning and improving the self and the world in ways we no longer understand, is worth revisiting as it illuminates nineteenth-century feminism, and brings together issues that second and third-wave feminist are still confronting today. Gaskell's point, that the idea of power is just as limiting and disabling as the idea of powerlessness, if not more so, joined with the more common Victorian notion that there must be a balance between feminine and masculine ways of approaching problems and the world in

general, and that men and women depend on the differences between them for harmony and fulfillment, is a strong argument for the distinction or separation of spheres and roles and expectations by gender. For Gaskell, the perspective gained from being a member of the less officially powerful gender, a perspective invested in the details of how to make everyday life useful and comfortable and in individuals rather than systems, institutions, or broader concepts of ambition or power, is an essential and valuable thing. By reevaluating relationships between gender and power, however, Gaskell also presents a critique of those broader ideological concepts. In typical Victorian fashion, Gaskell frames value in terms of utility, and for the characters that people her fiction, the conventional categories of masculine and feminine are eminently useful. They allow men to focus on the responsibilities of financial security and moral certainty for their families, while women provide alternate, emotional and care-centered solutions through their experience of the more immediate, less broad or theoretical details of individual lives. It is more complicated than this straightforward complementary relationship, however, which, though it may well be the Victorian popular idea and sometimes Gaskell's ideal as well, does not account for the imbalances of power and authority that arise. Working out how gender complements can actually work on a practical level, Gaskell addresses concepts like feminine sacrifice, awareness of gender construction, subversive reconstruction, and transgressions of gender codes when circumstances call for it, suggesting that in her view the concept of separate genders with separate behaviors and separate positions in a hierarchy is purely utilitarian and always negotiable. The centrality of these negotiations of gender and agency throughout her fiction suggests just how important the roles that women and men play were to her understanding of social relationships and how the world works. It is the consistency with which the questions of femininity, masculinity, and agency pervade her fiction, and the complexities that develop in her depictions of gender hierarchies and stereotypes, that distinguish Gaskell both from her contemporaries and from more recent thinkers on the subject. Her insistence on gender roles as both useful and negotiable is a way for her to work comfortably within her own feminine role, identifying a way of constructing and differentiating feminine agency from masculine power and thus reevaluating the gender hierarchy at the same time as accepting it. That she conveys these ideas in fiction is especially apt, as fiction itself takes on the conventionally feminine agency of influence, making its arguments and changing ideologies without appearing to do so. Her celebration of a perspective that promotes selflessness and

sympathy as opposed to ambition and consolidation of power is one worth taking seriously today as we seek for diversity of opinions and approaches to social and human issues. For Gaskell, that diversity is grounded in the maintenance, the mutability, and the value, of both gender categories.

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